NF

ISSUE #46:
LIVE BY THE
SWORD

PANZER PALADIN

ANIMAL CROSSING:
NEW HORIZONS

LEFT IN THE PAST:
WIZARDS & WARRIORS

BRAVELY DEFAULT II

WEBSITE INSIGHT:
OPERATION
RAINFALL

TRIALS OF MANA

POKÉMON
MYSTERY DUNGEON:
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DOUBLE DRAGON
& KUNIO-KUN
RETRO BRAWLER
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LOST IN UNTRANSLATION:
ZANGEKI NO REGINLEIV

LEGO
SUPER MARIO

INTERVIEW:
JONATHAN LAVIGNE
OF TRIBUTE GAMES

CLUBHOUSE GAMES:
51 WORLDWIDE CLASSICS

KATANA KAMI:
A WAY OF THE SAMURAI
STORY

MAY/
JUNE 2020

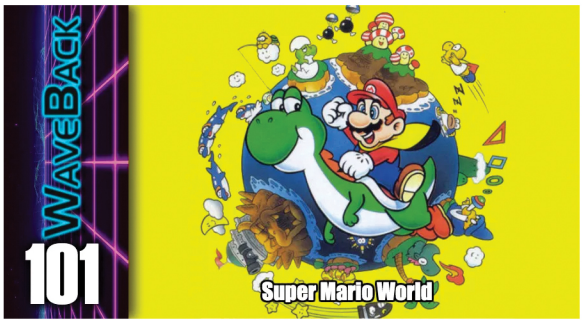
Xenoblade Chronicles™
Definitive Edition

WELCOME KRIS!

ANNOUNCING A PROMOTION! For several years now, you've seen the name Kris Randazzo pop up in NF issues. Kris has been a recurring contributor for a long time, particularly through the "Peripheral Vision" article series in the Retro section. Now, at long last, he's been given the upgrade to full Nintendo Force team member status!

In this, his first issue as an official staff writer, he's been charged with pioneering another new column concept in the Retro section: "Left in the Past." After you check that out, why not revisit some of Kris' past work on his own site? Over at Geekade he's been creating a wealth of great content for years, from written articles to podcasts, all covering a variety of video games and other pop culture topics. Take an afternoon to browse the archive, then stay tuned for more! — **LUCAS**

Geekade.com



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LIVE BY THE SWORD

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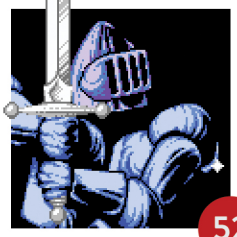
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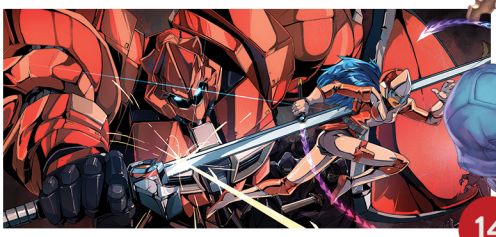
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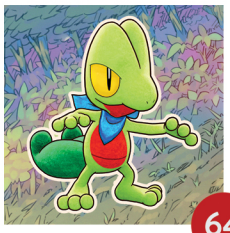
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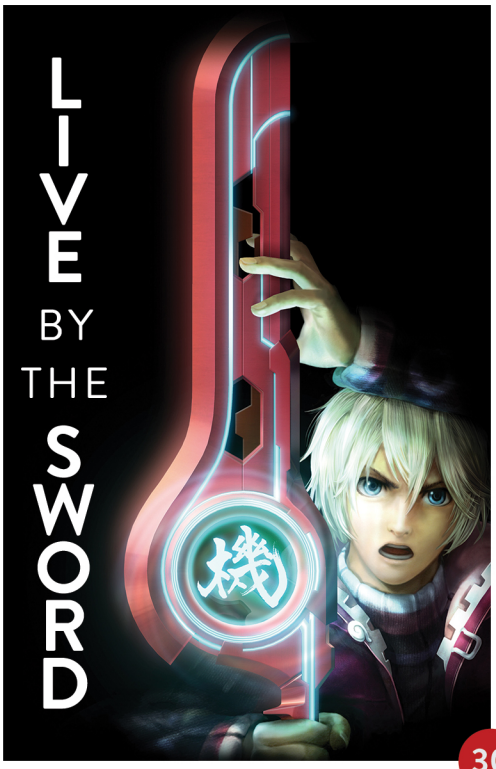

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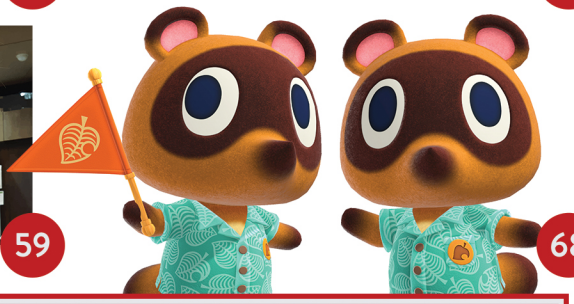
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ON THE COVER

The Nintendo Force was first formed a few months after the American release of Xenoblade Chronicles on Wii, and our first issue wasn't until the following January – so we missed our chance to place this iconic art on one of our covers. I suppose we could have used it back when the 3DS port hit, but I'm glad we held off! At long last, here's the mighty, menacing Mechonis looming large over the landscape. Standing ready to oppose its evil? Shulk's signature sword, the incredible Monado!

MAY/JUNE 2020

INBOX

BRANDISH YOUR BLADE!

Swordplay is simple.

Not in the real world, of course! Goodness knows if I ever found myself in the middle of an actual duel, I'd then soon find myself skewered shortly thereafter. But in the world of video games, nothing's more natural than hacking and slashing.

It's one of the easiest interactions to understand. You, a good guy, have a pointy blade. You press a button and it makes bad guys go away. Rinse and repeat. Instantly satisfying gameplay!

Swords have been the most common weapon wielded by video game heroes for decades as a result of that simplicity — and no, I'm not going to go back and try to verify that claim. Who could? The number of different games that have pressed a virtual blade into the player's hands are countless at this point.

But among that myriad, a handful of truly special swords have emerged over the years. Iconic weapons that make you feel especially powerful and especially special when you use them to make the bad guys go away, versus whatever nondescript hunk of sharp metal might have been offered to you otherwise.

In this NF issue, we springboard off the upcoming launch of Xenoblade Chronicles: Definitive Edition to pay homage to several of those incredible weapons. Our titular feature, Live by the Sword, asserts our Top 20 selections from the armory of the ages. That leads into our final preview of the new Xenoblade Chronicles remake for the Switch, itself focused on Shulk's multi-functional Monado — arguably the greatest weapon ever wielded by any of Nintendo's many first-party heroes.

Other swords then carve their own places throughout the remainder of this edition, through our reviews of games like Katana Kami, Samurai Shodown and Trials of Mana to our exclusive final preview of Panzer Paladin and our interview with its creator, Jonathan Lavigne. We're even kicking off an all-new, hopefully recurring column in the Retro section called Left in the Past. It'll look back at decades-old games that have never been rereleased on any more modern hardware after their original launches — first up is the Wizards & Warriors series. I know you old-schoolers remember IronSword!

So kneel, good knights, and arise again with greater knowledge of gaming's best blades. This NF is preparing you for combat!

Lucas M. Thomas

LUCAS M. THOMAS, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

ISSUE #45: MARCH/ APRIL 2020

We may bemoan the practice in the years of drought Nintendo forces us to suffer through in-between mainline sequels in some of their biggest series, but you can't argue with the results! Animal Crossing: New Horizons has become a massive sales success, and reception to our last issue reflected that. Years of thirst were finally quenched! As always, though, our last issue's Player's Poll looked ahead to our topic for this next edition. We asked you to share your personal history with the Xenoblade brand, and whether you were part of the fight to bring the first game to Wii. We asked about your favorite RPGs in general, or if you generally try to avoid that genre. And finally we sought your thoughts on which other Wii games deserved to be totally visually *overhauled* in the same way Xenoblade is. Your responses:

LETTERS

I've known about Xenoblade Chronicles from the beginning, ever since it was announced in 2009 as "Monado: Beginning of the World." I read about it in Nintendo Power and always wanted to play it, but I never got the chance as it sold out in my area quickly. I was able to get a hold of Xenoblade Chronicles X on Wii U, and Shulk is fun in Smash Bros., but I felt like there were subtle hints that I missed. I absolutely love RPGs, even making one of my own, so I would love to give the new Xenoblade Chronicles: Definitive Edition a chance. Especially now that I finally got a Nintendo Switch in February! Here's hoping we get the Last Story and Pandora's Tower on Switch later on, too, as those didn't get quite the same amount of love that Xenoblade did. **— ALEX BODINE**

I wasn't there to fight for the first game on Wii. I was introduced with Xenoblade Chronicles X. I did go back for the first game afterward. **— JULIO CABRERA**

Truthfully, until NF's mention of it in Issue #43, when Xenoblade came to the Wii I had no idea of the struggles it faced reaching the limelight. I admit it had some rough edges (not just visually) and it was disappointing to be the only one out of everyone I loaned it to to complete it. Despite that, I thought the world of it because it had the largest maps and enemies I had ever witnessed on the Wii. The music, story and characters were also a step beyond the norm and it really made up for any complaints. I bought the next two games without hesitation. I finally managed to rope my older sister into the series with XC2 and finally had someone else who loved it. She doesn't play games a lot and mostly only cared about watching me play Kingdom Hearts, but XC2 had her watching every cutscene with immediate interest. (She also developed a crush on Jin, so that helped a lot.) Now that I'm a little more seasoned and understand the game better, I'm really happy for a second go at XC1 and hope I get to show it to my sister. **— BEN W.**

If your sister had a crush on Jin, just wait until she meets Riki!

At first, I had absolutely no interest in Xenoblade. It was my brother who bought a copy and happily dove in. (He got about a hour in and, to this day, has still yet to make any further progress.) I gave it a play once Shulk was revealed as a Smash Brother, so I would be able to understand the references to his game. It was wonderful! I loved exploring the world and seeing where the story would go next. (Still took me about three years to beat it.)

My favorite RPG is probably EarthBound. Takes me right back to childhood, where my friends and I went on imaginary adventures all over the world. **— ALEX WINTER**

I've played a good amount of RPGs, but my favorite of all time remains Pokémon Sapphire on the GBA. Pokémon is my favorite series of all time, and Sapphire was the game that got me hooked. The way the game

WE THREE MEOWTHS

Hi! My name is Amelia and I am a fan of your magazines and, more importantly, Pokémon. My favorite is and always will be Meowth. The funny thing is, Meowth's always been my favorite – even though I'd never taken much of a fancy toward Pokémon until Sword & Shield (when I started playing it). And when the third version of Meowth came along, I just had to draw a picture of all of them.

Please consider publishing my email in your magazine. I would love it very Meowth!

– AMELIA

Your wish is our command – especially since you included this great artwork! (If any other readers out there would like to share art too, please feel free!)

DON'T ANGER THE OX

Hey Ox,

Do you prefer the Paper Mario series or the Mario & Luigi series? **– @BEESONPHONES**

I originally preferred Paper Mario, before things got "sticky." Then I preferred Mario & Luigi, until AlphaDream went bankrupt. Now I prefer sitting huddled on the floor in a corner, rocking back and forth while thinking back to better times when Mario had two fantastic ongoing RPG series.

What's your opinion of Super Paper Mario? Did you enjoy the change or did you prefer the original style? **– @LOOKOUT_ITS_JAX**

I liked it! But I think I prefer Thousand-Year Door for its story and characters a bit more.

immerses you in its world is rivaled by no others for me, and I love the story and characters as well. It may seem silly, but submerging the world in water is pretty nefarious in my book!

Other than Pokémon, I very much enjoy Persona 5, Dragon Quest XI S, Octopath Traveler and Final Fantasy IX! I'm a bit of a fresh-faced college student, so I haven't played too many older RPGs, but I hope to do so in the future. **– NICK BARRIEAU**

Pokémon Sapphire came out when I was in college . . . (I'm getting old, aren't I?)

For remastered games, there are some obvious choices from the Wii that either should or will be coming to the Switch (I would not be surprised if we hear about a Super Mario Galaxy or Metroid Prime Trilogy remaster soon). This would also be a perfect time (with the popularity of the series rising) to have a combined collection of the Fire Emblem Radiant series (Path of Radiance from GameCube, Radiant Dawn from Wii). Getting a graphical overhaul and other improvements would be great for these games! Others I would like to see get that visual overhaul, though, would be lesser-known games that some people may have missed. Muramasa: The Demon Blade was one of my favorite games for the Wii – the art style just begs to be reborn on the Switch. The Last Story was a great RPG toward the end of the Wii's lifetime that I think flew under the radar for many and would be an excellent candidate. And one that I feel would turn out amazing on the Switch would be Lost in Shadow, a puzzle platformer where you play as a shadow and interact with the background shadows of this massive tower you have to climb, so it heavily relies on the visuals to create the world and would be a great candidate for a remaster. **– SEAN MORROW**

A Wii game I think could use a visual overhaul is The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword. The game is nearing a decade old, and as far as I know has only been released on the Wii. I also think the game could greatly use a control scheme overhaul so you can play the game with a standard controller.

– DANIEL HINCHCLIFF

We reported on a rumored Skyward Sword HD back in NF #38, but nothing's been made official yet. Was it ever really real? Who can say?

ERROR REPORT (AGAIN)

Hey NF! I think I might've spotted a typo in the Player's Poll section on Question #3 (overall --> overhaul*?) I'm not sure if it's already been found by someone or if y'all accept messages regarding tiny mistakes but just wanted to let you know!

– ALEXANDER FAMOUS

OK, I don't know if this is funny or sad, but on Page 5 of our NF #45 I apologized for an error in NF #44, and then one page later, on Page 6, I made another error. (I think I've got to give up my dream of ever publishing a totally perfect, error-free issue!) Just cut us some slack if you ever spot a typo or any other kind of minor mistake in this or any future edition. We're only humen, after all!

THE SMILE OF A WINNER!

Everybody say hello to Hannah! She saw the Player's Poll in NF #44, sent in her responses and saw her submission printed in NF #45. Then she turned the page and saw her name again, declaring she'd won a copy of Animal Crossing: New Horizons! Her Dad was kind enough to send in these photos of her joy at discovering she'd been named the winner as well as the day her prize arrived in the mail. Maybe you'll be the next winner? All you have to do is answer the questions in the Player's Poll in each issue and you'll be in the running! (Hope your New Horizons island is shaping up nicely, Hannah!)

THE PLAYER'S POLL

Congratulations to **Nick Barrieau**, the winner of last issue's Player's Poll! Your new chance to win is below, and this time around we're interested to read your responses to some questions about everyone's favorite pasta-loving plumber!

QUESTION #1

What is your all-time favorite Super Mario game? Could be a main adventure or any of the spin-offs – any game with "Super Mario" in the name!

QUESTION #2

The very first Super Mario Bros. game will turn 35 this year. Have you ever beaten it? Tell us about that experience!

QUESTION #3

Look ahead into Mario's future. What kind of new games should he take on as he heads toward 40 years old? What's your ideal Super Mario sequel?

Email your responses to **PlayersPoll@NFMagazine.com** with the subject line "Player's Poll for Issue #47" – this time, one reader whose answers are picked for print will win a brand-new copy of the next new Super Mario game! (It's still a secret!)

NINTENDO FORCE

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Lucas M. Thomas
@NintendoForce

STAFF WRITERS
Evan Campbell
@evancampbell
Chris Carter
@DtoidChris
Kevin Cassidy
@GoNintendoTweet
Jonathan Holmes
@NonTrotski
Kevin Knezevic
@kevknez
Brett Martin
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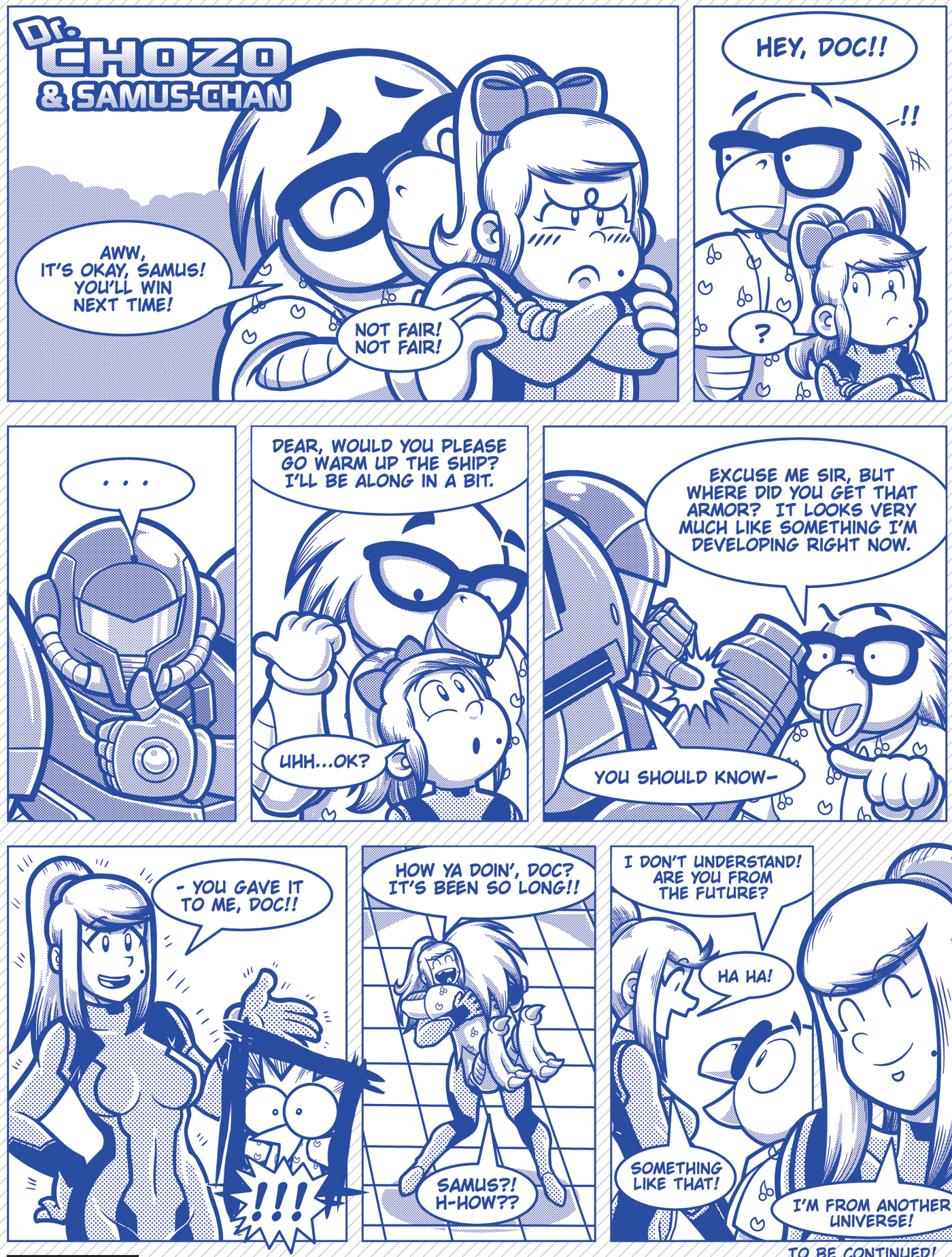
Nadia Oxford
@nadiaoxford
Tony Ponce
@megaStryke
Kris Randazzo
@GeekadeKris
Rebecca Rudranath
@strawbecky_81

STAFF ARTISTS
Mark Kelly
@Fryguy64
Lindsey Layne King
@Jazaaboo
Matthew Loffhagen
@kotorcomics
Matthew Taranto
@MatthewPTaranto
Thor Thorvaldson
@thormeister1971

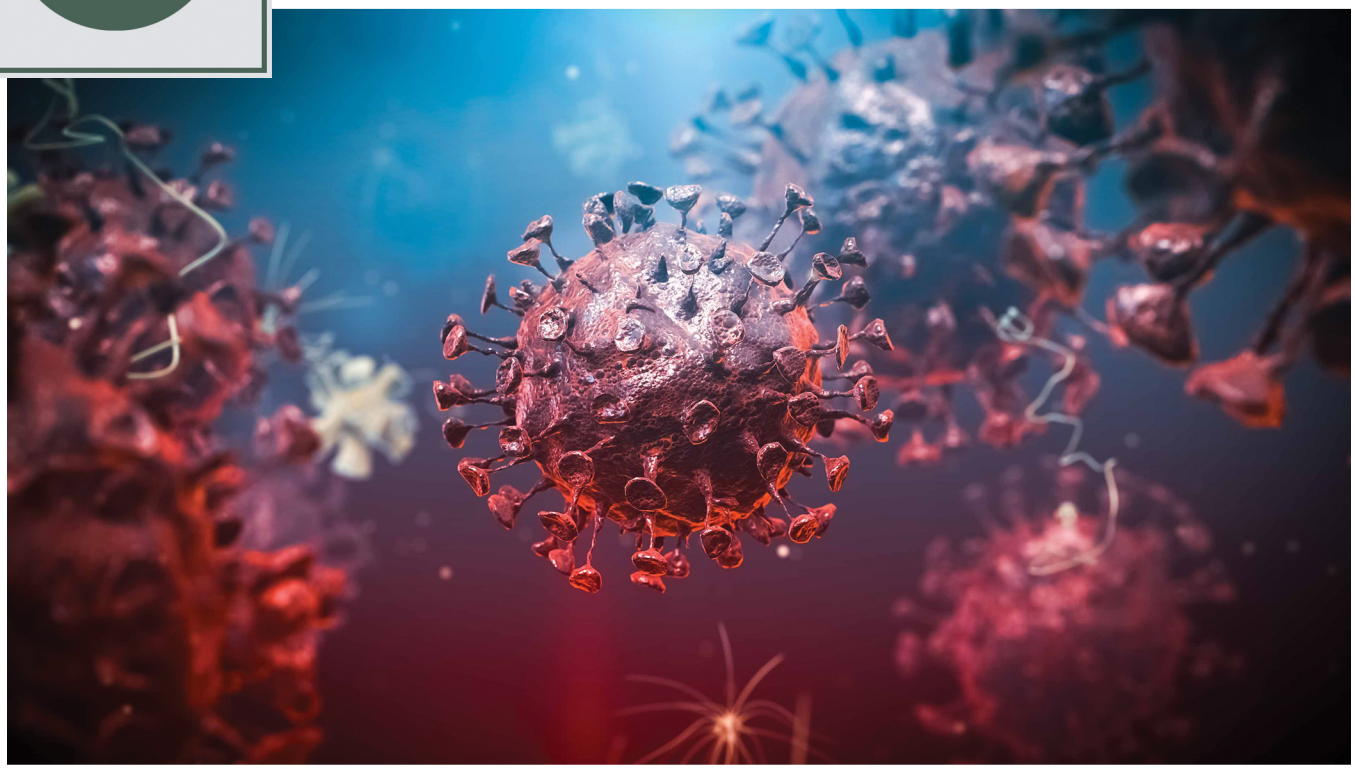
GET IN TOUCH!

Have a question? The best way to ask it is through Patreon's Direct Messaging system, which you have access to if you're one of our Patreon backers! Submitting your questions there is best, since we're able to reference your subscription info right there on the spot and help you directly!



TO BE CONTINUED!

BY THOR THORVALDSON



VIRUS OUTBREAK RAGES

All of humanity is battling an unprecedented global pandemic.

I THINK EARTHBOUND said it best: "At times like this, kids like you should be playing Nintendo games."

We try to keep things lighthearted here for the most part – this being an entertainment magazine, after all – but we can't avoid acknowledging the current crisis gripping the planet. An outbreak of a novel coronavirus, COVID-19, has spread throughout the world. And, as a result, the normal way of life for much of humanity has drastically shifted.

Many businesses have closed their doors. Schools have been shut down. Sports games, concerts and any other events that commonly draw together large groups of people have been cancelled for the foreseeable future. Almost overnight, these fundamental fixtures of culture and society have been removed from the human equation.

That's just the beginning: Stricter stay-at-home lockdown orders have been put in place in many states here in the U.S. and in several countries around the world, restricting any unessential travel. People are not supposed to leave their homes unless they're taking short trips out to pick up supplies or food, and then they're supposed to head straight back home to "shelter in place" again.

I guess I should just say "we" rather than "they," since we're all in this together. The majority of the work on this NF issue has been completed with my wife and four sons all here in the house alongside me. We've been hunkered down since mid-March. The rest of the Nintendo Force team has been similarly shut in around the world in their homes.

All of these actions have been taken on a massive communal scale in order to attempt to slow the spread of the coronavirus, as it is a respiratory illness that is passed from person to person by proximity. An infected individual can infect someone else by coughing, sneezing or even just breathing in close quarters with them. Additionally, infected people may not appear to be obviously sick, and may not even know that they're carrying and spreading the disease if they have not manifested clear symptoms. Therefore, the only way to ensure your safety is to keep a safe distance away from absolutely everyone. Lockdowns – just staying at home and keeping clear of contact with anyone you don't live with – help to achieve that goal.

Even still, the virus continues to spread. Whether through noncompliant people resisting the orders to stay home and protect themselves or else through people who are essential workers like grocery store employees and health care providers, the virus has kept on finding new vectors to multiply itself.

The worst news of all is that this coronavirus has proven to be despicably deadly. Hundreds of thousands of lives have already been lost around the world, and millions are currently fighting the battle against the infection. The gaming industry has been directly impacted already – we've lost legends like Rick May, the incredible voice actor who brought Peppy Hare to life. ("Do a barrel roll!") He came down with COVID-19 and lost his fight with the disease on April 8. He was 79.

It's mind-boggling how quickly this illness has spread around the globe – we publish NF on a bi-monthly basis, and when our previous issue was sent to print in mid-February, the situation did not seem nearly as dire here in the United States. Now constant virus coverage dominates every daily news cycle. Every facet of our lives has been impacted – in many ways, probably permanently.

And so, again, at times like this it's best to play video games. That may seem flippant, but seriously, staying at home, staying safe and entertaining yourself with activities like playing games is the best way to help in this fight right now. Do your part to keep the virus from spreading further, and support the doctors and nurses who are out there every day, sacrificing their safety to care for others.

We will get through this. We will get through this together. **– LUCAS**

A Ring Fit Frenzy!

Nintendo's fitness RPG is sold out worldwide.

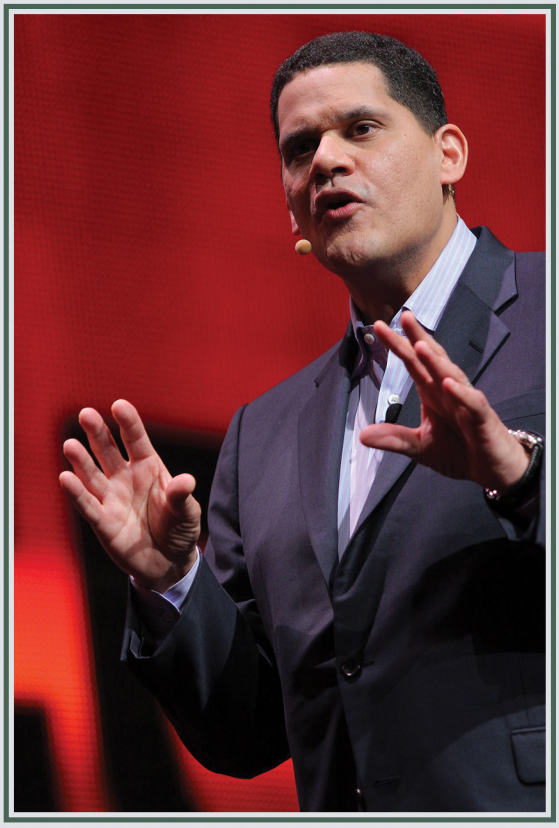
I MADE A mistake. I was interested in Ring Fit Adventure and planned to purchase it right when it launched last October . . . but then I pulled back from placing an order. Having seen how Nintendo's various Labo kits had dropped steeply in price following their launches over the last couple of years, I figured Ring Fit — also a game only available physically and reliant on a packed-in periperal — would follow suit. I thought a bit of patience on my part might help me save some cash.

I was wrong.

In fact, the exact opposite scenario has happened, as Ring Fit has become so incredibly popular that's it now been sold out worldwide for months. New copies are still available, but only from resellers charging wildly inflated rates online — as of this writing, prices have climbed north of $310 on Amazon. The MSRP was originally $79.99.

The drastic increase in demand for Nintendo's newest fitness game can be directly linked to the coronavirus pandemic, as in a world where it's no longer safe to leave home and go to a gym or exercise in close proximity to any other individuals, having a unique, fun way to burn calories within the confines of your living room has become incredibly valuable. If you nabbed a copy before all this chaos erupted, consider yourself lucky! (And please use it, for the sake of all of us out here who want to be able to, but can't.)

Unfortunately, it seems the game may not be restocked any time soon. The outbreak has also impacted production facilities, so new Ring-Cons may not be able to be manufactured for a while. **— LUCAS**



GameStop's Savior?

Reggie returns to the gaming industry.

JUST A YEAR after stepping away from the gaming industry, former Nintendo of America President and COO Reggie Fils-Aime has been pulled right back in again — and his timing seems to be terrible.

It was announced in early March that Reggie has been named to the board of directors for GameStop, the national video game-focused retail chain that has struggled for years to adapt to a gaming market that has increasingly adopted digital downloads, skipping the need for retail transactions and physical media in the process. His years of experience steering the ship at Nintendo clearly give him an invaluable insight into every issue impacting the industry, and if anyone can help save GameStop from bankruptcy and obsolescence, it's the Regginator.

Unfortunately, his joining the company came a mere handful of days before stay-at-home orders became commonplace across the nation in response to the spread of COVID-19, forcing GameStop locations to close their doors. That's not going to help the corporate bottom line. Even worse, the company has damaged whatever might have remained of their good name by instructing their locations to defy state governors' lockdown decrees, arguing that GameStop stores are "an essential business." Callous communications from executives in the organization told employees to wrap their hands in plastic bags and crack open the front doors of stores to pass games to customers.

Yikes. Reggie's definitely got his work cut out for him as he figures out a way to deal with damage control for that, then tries to solve all the financial troubles the company was already facing! **— LUCAS**

MARIO JOINS FORCES WITH LEGO!

The impossible partnership is becoming a reality with a unique new product line unlike anything seen before.

FIRST THEY TEASED us on March 10 – Mario Day – with an image saying a LEGO and Super Mario crossover was coming. Then, just two days later, the first video of a playset was released. Everyone who ever played with LEGO and played any Mario game had a previous notion of what a Mario LEGO playset might look like . . . and I bet none of them were even close to what was revealed! This was more than just Nintendo lending its license to LEGO to play with. The two corporations collaborated on a new way to play!

First off, most of the pieces look like they will only work with the set they come with, which is a bit of a letdown – until you see what they're going for: a digitally interactive playset complete with an emotive Mario figure. Mario's eyes and mouth are screens, bringing him to life, and on his chest is another display that has the game elements. This shows timers, coin collecting and other actions that your LEGO Mario figure takes while moving along the playset.

The "Starter Course" set is built in sections that Mario must traverse. There's plenty to interact with, like a Goomba to stomp, a Question Block to bump and flagpole for Mario to slide down – and afterward it appears he gets a coin total and how much time was left on the timer. The villain of the set is Bowser Jr., while his bad Dad is lurking in the separate "Bowser's Castle Boss Battle Expansion" set. Further sets include a Monty Mole, a Piranha Plant and more alongside other unique interactive elements, and all will be sold separately.

What an innovative idea! And no wonder, because Takashi Tezuka says in the press release, "The new product we created together with the LEGO Group seeks to combine two different styles of play: one where you freely build the world of Mario and the other where you play with Mario in the very world that you have created."

The sets are slated to go on sale on August 1, and Starter Course pre-orders are open now!

Collector's Corner is compiled by Brett Martin, the world record holder for the largest collection of video game memorabilia on Earth. For more cool collectibles and information on how to order from import shops, visit his site, The Video Game Memorabilia Museum, at videogamemm.com.

Xeno's Blades

Ready to be summoned to your shelf.

AFTER SELLING THROUGH their original run, you can once again own both legendary Blades from Xenoblade Chronicles 2 – but it will cost you some gold! Back in December of 2018, Good Smile Company released a Pyra figure in a dynamic pose. Then, in March of 2019 they released Pyra's alternate form, Mythra. Her pose was designed so the two would look great together, and they cost $165 each. They were retired, but in December this year they're set to be rereleased at the original pricing. If only they had a Rex figure to drive them!

The Latest Links

Fresh takes on the Hero of Hyrule.

WE'VE HAD TWO series consisting of six Link figures from Medicom's Ultra Detail line, and we're about to get three more! Get ready for Toon Link sporting Ezlo from Minish Cap, Adult Link from Ocarina of Time and Champion Link from Breath of the Wild. Each figure is between $12 and $15, and they're some stunning sculpts. In fact, the rest of the series has yet to release in another region, so go to your favorite online import shop and snap them up before the prices rise! I recommend **Amiami.com** or **hlj.com**.

Just in from Dream Land

The avalanche of cute Kirby merch continues!

NEW PLUSHES OF Daroach from Squeak Squad, Waddle Dee, Kirby and Gooey have joined the Kirby All-Star line from San-ei. Also of note are all of the dioramas that are releasing from Re-ment. The latest set involves the Triple Deluxe vine that many characters like Waddle Dee, Meta Knight, Magolor and Kirby are climbing. Kirby is seen three times, and plucks a Star Rod from its top. The tree's unique, but it's a theme that Re-ment has used for many licenses.

Cooking Up Controversy

What in the world is happening with Cooking Mama?

TAKE A GOOD look at that box art there, commit it to memory and be ready to grab it if you ever come across a copy — the new Cooking Mama: Cookstar may be about to become the newest, rarest modern collector's item. Why? Because apparently it isn't supposed to exist!

We ran a preview for Cooking Mama: Coming Home to Mama a few issues ago, noting that it also had a second subtitle, Cookstar, and we weren't sure which would end up being the final title. That's because advance info on this release was kind of sketchy. Now we have a better understanding of why!

Planet Entertainment, the publishers of this new Mama sequel, have launched the game both physically and in the Switch eShop . . . against the wishes of the owner of the Cooking Mama IP, a different company called Office Create. Now the rights holders are fighting to get the game pulled from store shelves and the publishers are holding firm to their decision to release it, saying they had every right to publish the game.

The situation gets even weirder! The game has also been accused of being essentially malware for your Switch, as it supposedly uses the computing power of your console to mine cryptocurrency while you play. The veracity of that claim is up in the air, but what's undoubtedly true is that Mama has somehow found herself in the middle of the strangest rights-related video game controversy of this console generation! **— LUCAS**

Mad Mythical Monkey

The Pokémon Company introduces Zarude!

YOU'D THINK THAT we would have used an issue theme like "Live by the Sword" in connection with Pokémon Sword just a few months ago — but no. It just goes to show, again, how prevalent swords are in video games that this same name can be applied in a timely manner again only three issues later! Luckily, Sword & Shield merit mention again anyway, as their roster of monsters is about to get a boost.

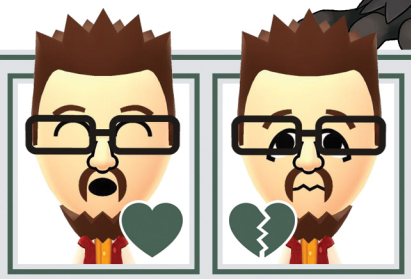
. . . And I'm not talking about the DLC! The paid Isle of Armor expansion is still on schedule to arrive in June, but shortly after that, the world will officially be introduced to another new Pocket Monster: Zarude. This mean-looking Dark/Grass monkey is the series' latest Mythical Pokémon, and it'll make its debut in the franchise by way of the new movie set to open in Japan on July 10.

(Whether or not the film will be delayed due to the coronavirus outbreak isn't yet known, so for now July 10 is still the official date.)

Though it hasn't yet been revealed exactly how Zarude will be added to Sword & Shield, we should all be able to encounter it and catch it at some point. And it seems like it would be a smart addition to anyone's fighting team, too, as it's got access to a powerful signature move called Jungle Healing that restores the HP and heals the status conditions of both Zarude and its allies in battle. The only caveat is that you have to train it all the way to Level 90 before it will learn that move!

Meanwhile, the movie should showcase Zarude's full extent of abilities even better. This is essentially Game Freak's take on Tarzan, as it can generate vines from its wrists, feet and even neck and use them to swing through the trees. I can't wait to see that! **— LUCAS**

Great!
The brand-new Cooking Mama game is now on sale.



Oh.
. . . Apparently it wasn't supposed to launch? Yikes!

FORECAST

A meteorological look at the biggest game and DLC releases currently scheduled to debut in the next few months.

HOVERING RIGHT IN the middle of NF's no man's land is the all-new 3D remake of Square's classic Seiken Densetsu 3 – it's hitting store shelves on April 24, which is just barely past our cut-off point for content for this edition. So we've got our full review started on Page 66 for you this time, but it's going to stay at an unfinished "In Progress" status until we can get the entire experience under our belts. Final review next time!

ALSO ORIGINALLY SET for an April arrival was the brand-new, Kickstarter-funded Switch port of the Wii U cult classic, The Wonderful 101. (But did the Kickstarter really fund it? I mean, it was already basically done before they even launched the fund-raising campaign.) Marketing tactics aside, it's now set for May 19, and Page 50's got our final preview.

YOU'LL HAVE 10 full days to relive the wonders of Wonderful 101 before the next callback to the early 2010s arrives: Our cover focus for this issue, Xenoblade Chronicles: Definitive Edition, is set to make its debut on May 29. There are a few different ways to buy your ticket back to the Bionis, so make sure you read the entirety of our final pre-release preview starting on Page 39 and consider all your options!

UNAFRAID OF THE massive Mechonis looming overhead and leaving its shadow on the end of the month of May, 2K Games is planning to push a huge slate of Switch ports into the market at that same time: The BioShock, Borderlands and XCOM series all make their Nintendo debuts on that same May 29 date. We take a look on Pages 44 and 45!

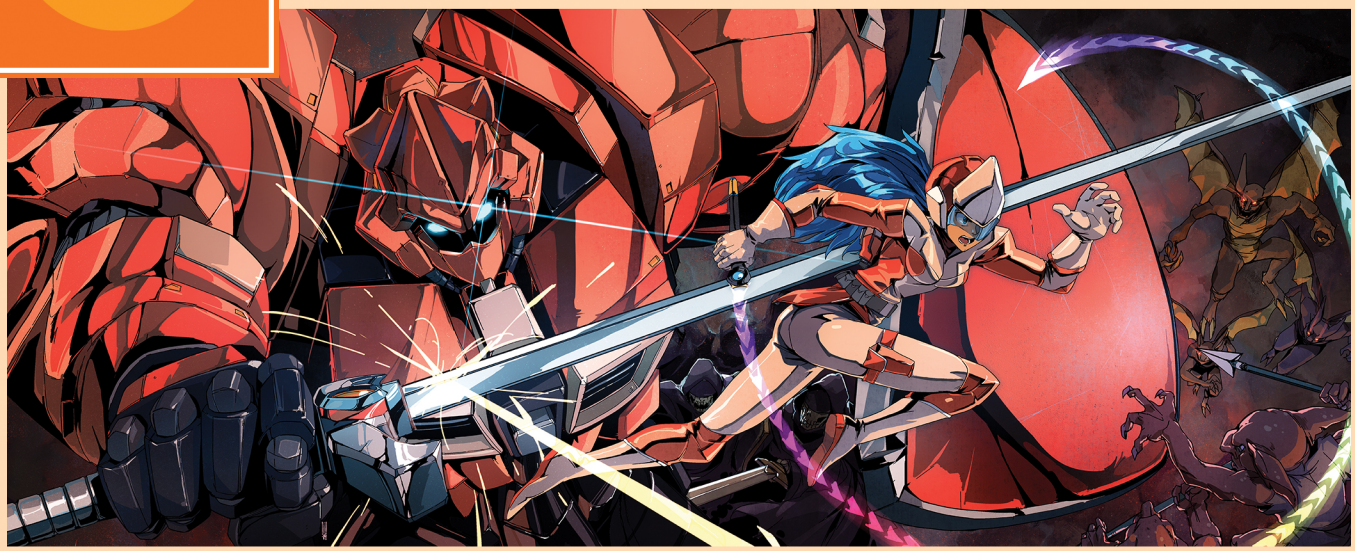
GAMERS OF THE "Touch Generations" era, rejoice! One of the greatest games from the Nintendo DS library has been remembered at last and is being blessed with an all-new Switch sequel. Clubhouse Games: 51 Worldwide Classics goes on sale on June 5, and budget-conscious gamers would be wise to pay close attention to it – with 51 different games all combined into a single package, it's sure to be unmatched in pure value! See Page 49.

LAST ON THE list for this edition of the Forecast is Bravely Default II, as we don't have a firm date set for its full release quite yet. But a free eShop demo has already been made available, so the good Mr. Holmes has already started putting it through its paces! You can read his thoughts on the still-in-development sequel ahead on Page 43.

NEVER ONE TO let himself become too predictable, Masahiro Sakurai's latest maneuver in keeping the Smash Bros. hype train chugging along has been to offer us just a tease about the next DLC character – enough to get us all pondering and speculating again. He's revealed that the first of the six planned Fighters Pass Vol. 2 characters will be officially unveiled in June, and that the new fighter, whoever they might be, will hail from the world of ARMS!

The possibilities are many. Spring Man would seem to be an obvious choice, but he's already serving as an Assist Trophy, so it would be odd to see him pull double duty as a full fighter too. (Not impossible, but I think unlikely.) Personally, my hope is that another woman joins the Smash cast as the ARMS rep, as the first Fighters Pass was almost entirely a boys' club, and there are several great options to choose from! Ribbon Girl would be a natural fit, as her signature ability of being able to jump multiple times in mid-air would translate perfectly to Smash – Kirby already does that same thing. Twintelle is an incredibly popular character, and her normal human arms could allow her to easily interact with items while her extending hair does all the punching from a distance. And then there's my personal favorite, Min Min! She could have a special meter that charges up to trigger her dragon arm transformation. Who will it be?!

"As noted at the beginning of the News section, the current global pandemic may very well mess around with a lot of the release dates listed here. The practicality of shipping physical game cartridges around the planet is going to be impacted for a while, going forward. We may get lucky and see no disruptions, but let's be reasonable and understanding fans if some games do have to slip back to later dates! – **LUCAS**"



Steal Swords to Defeat Demons!

It's a battle of science versus the occult in Tribute Games' Panzer Paladin!

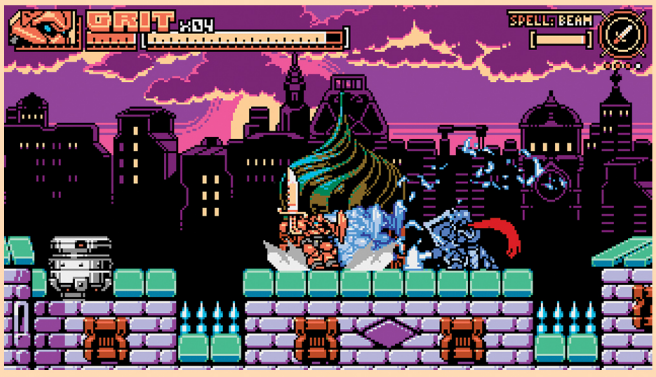
IT'S BEEN A while since we last saw Tribute Games' next big title, and boy has it come a long way. The leads now have names beyond their "Paladin" and "Squire" job titles, the list of friends and foes who fill their lives has expanded exponentially and the amount of weapons they can collect has shot through the roof! Most are swords, but the always unpredictable team at Tribute has thrown in a few curveballs, including (appropriately enough) baseball bats, hockey sticks and even a lead pipe. That's on top of all the broadswords, maces, spears and nearly 100 other types of sharp things to acquire. All of them have a place on an old-fashioned rock/paper/scissors strengths/weakness triangle, with blunt objects (rock) being strong against cutters (scissors) but weak against piercers (paper), and so on.

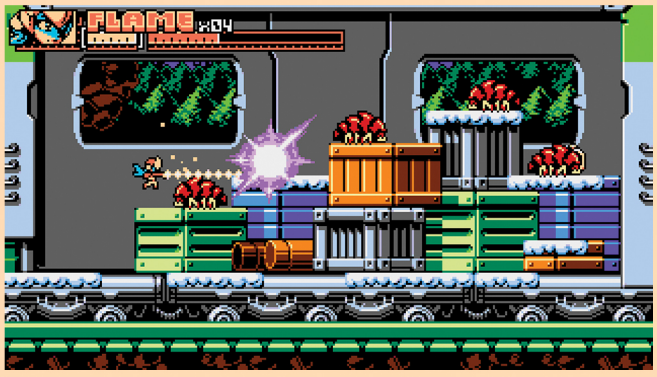
So what do you need all these instruments of death for anyway? Bad news folks: Earth has been invaded by demons, and this time, mankind has no power to resist them! Led by Lord Ravenous, these purple nightmares from the netherworld are here to take over our home, and they fight with unstoppable steel forged from human souls! The best way to turn the tide is to flip their own armaments against them, but even touching one can cause corruption, leading regular people to join the army of darkness in an instant. What's the solution? Technology! Specifically, a giant robot named Grit who's able to grasp spirit weapons without being transformed into a bad guy himself (at least, we hope not!). He's piloted by a young android woman named Flame who is equally pure of heart. (In that she doesn't have one.) With only each other to rely on, they enter the fray with the fate of the whole planet at stake, taking on wave after wave of enemies, including enormous spiders, violent snowmen and the wildest weremoose on record.

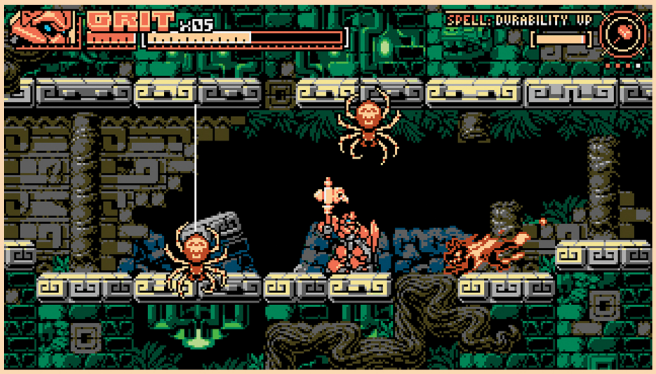
While the game is structured like a traditional, stage-based action title, it's hugely replayable, thanks in large part to that massive array of collectables I alluded to earlier. They're in plentiful supply, though some of the best may be held by bosses or otherwise kept under lock and key. Only the most diligent demon hunters will catch 'em all! What's really clever is how this cornucopia of combat cutlery can't quite break the game's balance.

In other like-minded games, like Bloodstained for instance, stockpiling powers and other resources can turn you into an unstoppable walking tank. In Panzer Paladin, you're always a walking tank, but building out your inventory isn't always the best way to win. The more weapons you carry, the tougher the game gets — hoarding may even cause a special enemy to start stalking you! This dynamic marks a masterstroke of organic difficulty adjustment, setting it head and shoulders above the competition.

Panzer Paladin is filled with original concepts like this, all mixed with echoes of games gone by. Combat with Grit feels like the finer side of Zelda II, complete with high/low guessing games, up and down thrusts and the selective use of magic to give you an







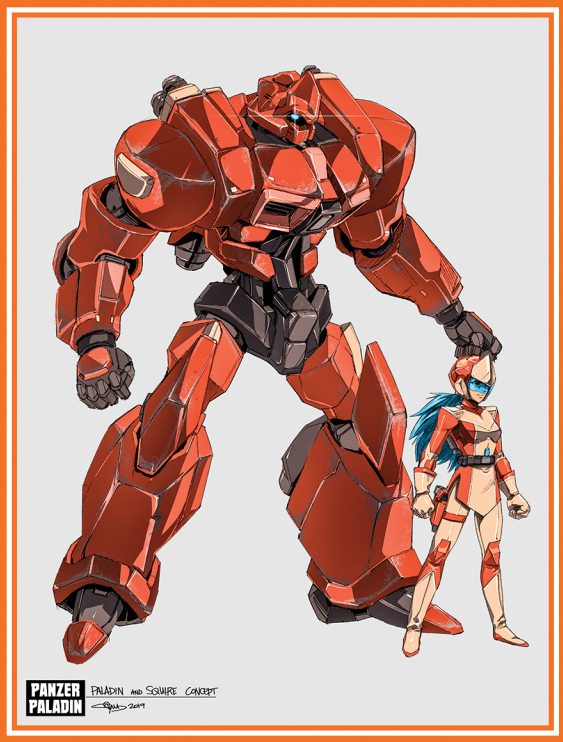
edge in the midst of battle. With Flame, the action plays out more like Bionic Commando, giving our hero multiple opportunities to swing gracefully through the air by her segmented laser whip. The synergy between these two is reminiscent of the interplay between Sophia and Jason in the Blaster Master series, with each side of the coin offering up its own vital contribution to the adventure. In terms of scope, the game feels more like a remake of the classic Konami title Metal Warriors, where your mech and its proportionate enemies feel truly towering compared to your relatively diminutive pilot. Combining all these elements together makes for a whole that's greater than the sum of its parts.

More than anything, Panzer Paladin feels like a game adaptation of a classic anime that never existed. The team at Tribute has collaborated with a host of artists who perfectly express that feel. The first is David Liu, an art director on the modern King's Quest games and the creator of Space Maria, a heroine who's straight out of the Dirty Pair/Bubblegum Crisis/Project A-Ko playbook. He's the one who made the amazing illustrations on these preview pages, while the drawing for this issue's Panzer Paladin poster is by Corey "Reyyy" Lewis. He's probably most well known for his work on the Rival Schools comics for Capcom, his character designs for an unproduced sequel to Jet Set Radio Future and Arem, his reimagining of Samus Aran as an alien nature photographer.

There are a few more direct connections between Panzer Paladin and the world of '80s and '90s comics and anime, but we'll save those details for a little later. You won't have to wait too long though, as we're hoping to have a full review soon!

For now, we can stew on a few unanswered questions, like who is the mysterious Horseman, the horse that fights like a man but walks like a horse? (See him on Page 60!) How will the game's 17 stages (the first 11 of which can be played in any order) each tell their own three-act story? Will Grit find a giant robot of his own that he can climb inside for a ride, and will Flame discover a way to beat the entire game all on her own? Dr. Bloom, Grit's mother, has a favorite sport. But what could it be? We'll find out soon, when Panzer Paladin is finally released on Switch.

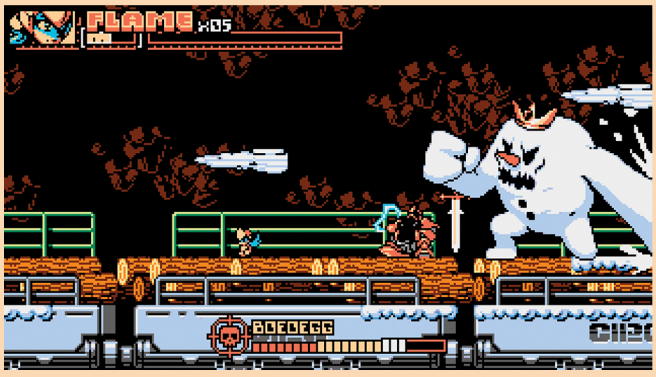
. . . But wait! We've got some more exclusive Panzer Paladin content prepared for you. Flip to Page 59 for our interview with Jonathan Lavigne, the man leading the charge to bring the game to life! **— JONATHAN**

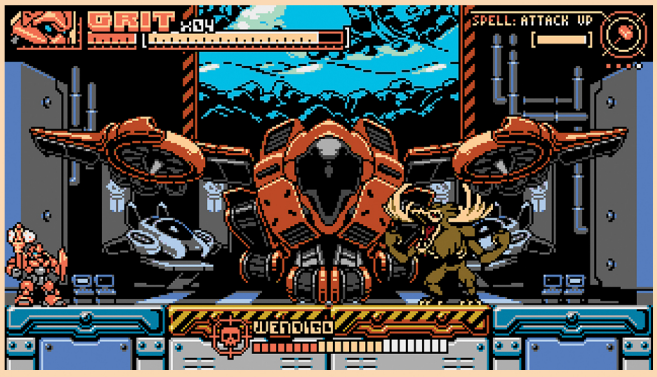


ROBO HEROES

GRIT & FLAME

These are the droids you're looking for! Since humans can't fight back against the invading demons, they have to call on the help of this pair of artificial lifeforms instead. Grit is the name of the A.I. living inside the powerful Paladin mech suit, while Flame is the Squire who leaps inside to pilot the larger machine — it's kind of an Iron Man situation where the suit has its own intelligence, but still needs someone to hop in to get it moving! While outside of the armor, though, Flame's got more moves than "normal" Tony Stark ever did. We never saw him wielding a laser whip or swinging across chasms like Indiana Jones, now did we?





The Story Continues

Go beyond the golf course in the all-new Sports Story!

SPORTS ARE DEAD. Long live sports!

I'm writing this while in a lockdown from coronavirus, and boy do I miss sports. So what better way to replicate a real-life round of sportsball than with a video game?

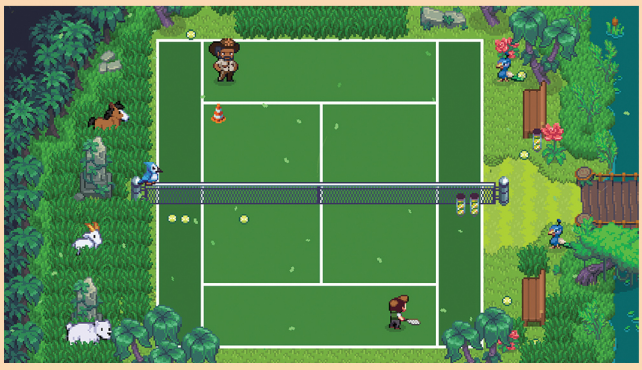
If you haven't played the 2017 Switch eShop sleeper hit Golf Story yet, there's no time like the present. I was late to that party and decided to take advantage of a sale to give the game a chance — and I'm really glad I did. It's a very casual and fun experience with little risk but plenty of reward. Hopefully its recently revealed sequel, Sports Story, will pick up right where Golf Story ended, as the ending was a bit abrupt and left me wanting more.

While Golf Story did have other minigames to play besides golf, the titular sport did hog the proverbial ball in terms of gameplay. This follow-up promises a broader sports world (even if the central focus still appears to be golf). Tennis, volleyball, soccer, cricket, baseball and more will be featured, and the gameplay for each of them should prove just as accessible as golf itself was before.

Golf Story was set up like a 16-bit Cinderella story, where the unnamed and unlucky main character decided to pick up his golf game after several years away from the clubs. Nobody ever really took him seriously, which was one of the best parts of the game. Perhaps a taste of success has swelled his ego enough that he now thinks he can take on all of sportsdom? Does he really fancy himself that much of an athlete that he thinks he can translate his regained golf skills to the likes of field sports and beyond? Surely Sports Story will be another hilarious tale wrought with oddball personalities and bizarre scenarios!

I'm wondering how many of the original characters will return to the scene, as part of the fun was seeing the RPG-like story unfold from hole to hole. The locales look interesting too, as we've seen that a tennis academy, some ruins, an Old West town and even a mine will appear. I can't wait to see what Sidebar Games does with all the new sports and playstyles that go along with them!

All of our burning questions will be answered in the second quarter of 2020 if all goes well with development, and I for one will be looking forward to all of the new sports metaphors that the game has to offer. **— BRETT**



Revived and Repaved

In Streets of Rage 4, this grimy city's never looked so good.

AFTER SUCCESSFULLY REMAKING the Sega Master System classic Wonder Boy III: The Dragon's Trap back in 2017, the folks at Dotemu and Lizardcube are now taking their talents to the streets — the Streets of Rage, that is!

Streets of Rage 4 is the long (long, *long*)-awaited sequel to the seminal Genesis beat-'em-up trilogy from back in the early '90s. Attempts have been made in the interim — one became Core Design and Eidos' Fighting Force for the N64, while a group of fans tried their own hand as well, though that project was shut down by Sega themselves years ago. All the while, save for the occasional rerelease or inclusion in a collection, the property by and large laid dormant . . . until now.

The game was announced by revealing some familiar faces as a part of its roster of selectable brawlers: Blaze Fielding and Axel Stone (who did put in an appearance in 2016's Project X Zone 2), the latter of whom is looking a little older and more grizzled now, complete with a tough-guy beard. They've since been joined by Cherry Hunter, the guitar-wielding daughter of Adam Hunter, a character who's also making his playable return to action for the first time since the original game in this installment. Joining the quartet is Floyd Iraia, a huge figure who was granted cybernetic replacements for his lost arms by SoR3's Dr. Zan.

Streets of Rage 4 is set some 10 years after its predecessor, and is being co-developed by Guard Crush Games, using the engine from their previous title, Streets of Fury. Like that game, four players will be able to locally team up cooperatively to show some street punks what's what, though online play is restricted to only two players teaming up, just like in the Genesis classics.

Finally, to the delight of many a Streets of Rage fan, the legendary Yuzo Koshiro and Motohiro Kawashima are stepping back into the role of composers for the game, where they'll be joined by several other talents. Koshiro wasn't a part of the team originally, but after seeing how it was coming along by playing a demo of the game at the 2019 BitSummit, he was convinced to sign on. To him, the game feels closest to Streets of Rage 2, regarded widely as the best of the original trilogy. We can only hope it lives up to that lofty legacy!

The game's set to launch on April 30, so we'll be thrashing punks by the time this issue hits your hands. Look forward to our full review next time! **— DAVID**

DIGGING INTO A NEW GENRE

The Blue Burrower will need both brawn and brains in Shovel Knight Pocket Dungeon.

WHILE SHOVEL KNIGHT'S Treasure Trove package is now finished, the Shovel Knight franchise is just getting started! After a recent update to Shovel Knight: King of Cards added multiplayer to Joustus (the title's titular card-battling experience), that game is finally content complete. As for Shovel Knight himself, he's already set to appear in not one, not two, but *three* first-party Yacht Club games, all coming soon.

First up will be Cyber Shadow, where Shovel Knight will make a cameo as an amiibo-activated fairy. The game is almost done, jam-packed with fast-paced swordplay and tons of power-ups. Seeing this new ninja terminator in action has some fans asking, what's the better blade, a technologically enhanced katana or an extremely sharp shovel? Maybe Cyber Shadow's Shovel Fairy will grow into a full-sized knight, ready to battle his shinobi master, and we'll find out!

Next up is Shovel Knight Dig, the 16-bit-style spin-off to Treasure Trove. Those looking to jump right back into familiar turf with the Blue Burrower will feel right at home here. Combining familiar mechanics with bright, beautiful new graphics is the call to arms here, but there's also a twist: If you descend through the dirt for too long, you get chewed up by a circular drill. Thankfully, the power tool stops temporarily while facing off against new bosses, like the bug-loving Hive Knight, the mushroom-minded Spore Knight and the big bad behind them all, the dreaded Drill Knight!

Last up is the newly announced Shovel Knight Pocket Dungeon, the riskiest and most groundbreaking of the bunch. The only other game you can really compare it to is Wario's Woods (which turns 25 this year!), as both are about moving a hero character through a puzzling space and using limited resources to make big wins. Shovel Knight must dig through hordes of enemies, and every time he attacks, he also gets hurt. The good news is if you hit a cluster of enemies, each individual foe takes damage, so your goal is to connect as many mean monsters together as you can before going in for the kill. Still, even with the best of plans, you take damage fast, so you'll have to run to replenish your health pretty regularly from potions, which can also be consumed in clusters. If Tetris is about finding the best way to erase the most blocks the fastest, Pocket Dungeon is about looking for the way to kill the most enemies at once as possible while minimizing how much damage you take in the process.

Each stage rolls out a new enemy type, power-up or another new way to get your hands dirty. There are also boss fights with knights new and old, and many of them are even playable, each bringing their own unique spin to the gameplay loop! For instance, instead of being healed by life-giving potions, Specter Knight loses health after hitting one (since he's already dead), so he'll need to find other ways to regain his strength. He's also available to play in 2P Battle Mode, making him one of over 10 combatants ready to throw down in this new style of showdown! — **JONATHAN**

8.0

Samurai Mystery Dungeon

KATANA KAMI: A WAY OF THE SAMURAI STORY

I'VE ONLY EVER dabbled in the Mystery Dungeon series, having never ventured beyond the comfort of the Pokémon-branded entries in that long-running saga. Likewise, my knowledge of the Way of the Samurai franchise is limited, as it's never had an entry on any Nintendo platform before this, so I've never paid it much mind. But something about Katana Kami, a new fusion of both of those venerable legacies, caught my eye. Now I've descended into the darkness of Jikai, and I've returned to the surface to report my findings.

Katana Kami isn't a traditional turn-based Mystery Dungeon game. (I'll also review one of those later in this same issue — Pokémon Mystery Dungeon: Rescue Team DX — so you'll be able to make a direct comparison.) This game retains the core aspect of generating random floor layouts every time you enter a dungeon, making every play session unique. In place of step-by-step exploration across a defined grid, though, Katana Kami substitutes a free-roaming, sword-slashing action game foundation.

It's a smart choice. The rigidity of the old turn-based style and its naturally slower pace can be a turn-off, so swapping in an easier-to-pick-up-and-play hack-and-slash core makes Katana Kami feel more accessible — while also still serving as a half step into the proper Mystery Dungeon series with those random dungeon layouts. I like the balance.

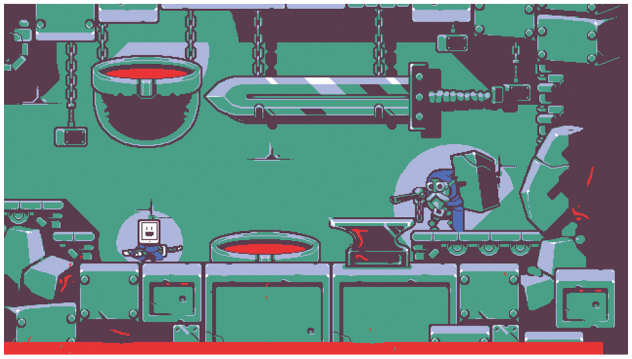
It helps that the combat engine is deep. Your heroic samurai engages foes with a simple set of slashes, dodges and parries at first, but soon a wide range of complexity opens up, as you unlock new abilities and gain access to several different styles of swordsmanship. You can alter your chosen blade and attacking stance on the fly in the middle of a fight — and you'll need to as you encounter more and more complex monsters and enemy samurai who'll happily counter any basic button-mashing strategy.

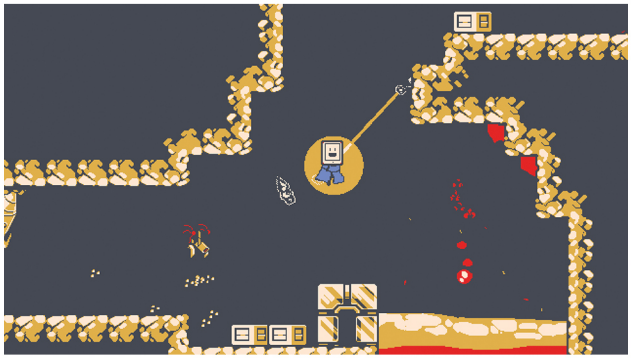
You descend deeper and deeper into dungeons felling foes and taking their dropped weapons as treasure, gather other materials scattered around on the ground and try to survive until you find an exit point, then return to the safety of the surface world and your home base of a simple blacksmith's shop. There, Dojima, the smith, has had his only daughter stolen from him because he's fallen into too much debt with a local crime syndicate. Your journeys into Jikai, the realm of monsters, all ultimately serve to fuel Dojima's struggling blacksmith business as you donate your spoils of war to help him get back on firmer financial footing and buy his daughter's freedom back. What's in it for you? Well, you get to marry her when she's finally free, of course!

The gameplay loop of entering the dungeon, gathering goods and defeating foes, coming back home to the smithy and then doing it all over again is solid, and works well as something to play for just a few minutes each day, making steady progress through the story. Trying to play too much in one sitting will have you feeling the repetition of it all too much and may diminish your enjoyment — so do your best not to binge. This is a Way of the Samurai story best read one chapter at a time!

— LUCAS

SWITCH PUBLISHER: SPIKE CHUNSOFT
DEVELOPER: ACQUIRE
RATING: M





Attack of the Ninja Tablet!

KUNAI

KUNAI IS ONE of approximately 14,679 pixel-art Metroidvanias currently available on the Nintendo Switch. In a field this crowded, standing out can be a challenge. Fortunately, this one finds a way to shine.

Kunai takes place in a post-apocalyptic future where people have somehow migrated their consciousnesses into robotic bodies with computer screens for heads. Most of these appear as old-fashioned tube monitors, but you play as Tabby, who is effectively a floating iPad that's also somehow tethered (wirelessly?) to a body. It's kind of hard to figure out the logistics of these character designs, and I honestly wasn't sure I'd like it very much at first. In a game about running around looking cool while doing ninja stuff, having a tablet for a head that's constantly smiling just looked silly — but it wasn't long before Tabby's expressiveness won me over. When you swing your sword a lot he gets an angry look on his face. When you duck for a few seconds, he looks curious. When you open a treasure chest, he displays a look of awe and wonder that you just can't help but smile at. He's very childlike, and that kind of joy is infectious.

Visually, Kunai utilizes a very limited color palette reminiscent of something you'd see on the Super Game Boy. It's not quite black & white, but not full color either. It's effective though, and comes paired with silky smooth animation, killer music and top-notch art direction.

The gameplay is equally polished. One of the earliest items you get is a pair of roped kunai, which become your primary mode of transportation. They can be thrown to stick into most surfaces, allowing you to swing around like Spider-Man. As you adventure on, you'll discover swords, guns and even a massive rocket launcher to help you take out your enemies (and blow stuff up), and these too have traversal capabilities. Recoil from your guns and rocket launcher, for example, can be used to help you cross chasms and reach high places.

Even with all these modes of transportation and destruction at your disposal, Kunai is still a challenge, but rarely so much so that you'll want to throw your controller across the room. There were a couple of moments toward the end of the game that had me stumped, but a little perseverance got me through. Save points are usually plentiful enough to make retries a fairly painless experience, but there were a few times where I got caught having traveled pretty far without finding one, then died and had to restart a long way from where I wanted to be. The good news is, even when you die, you don't lose any items or currency, making death somewhat useful. All the enemies you defeated respawn, giving you another opportunity to take them out and collect even more cash. Then you can go to the various shops (represented by wireless routers) and purchase new moves — or, if you've unlocked the forge, power up your sword. You'll be glad you did.

Most importantly, this game feels really good to play. Every hit has just the right amount of punch to it. When you take or deal damage, get the hang of swinging around on your kunai ropes or even land from a particularly high fall, it just feels right.

With personality and polish to spare, Kunai hits its mark. **— KRIS**

8.0

SWITCH PUBLISHER: THE ARCADE CREW
DEVELOPER: TURTLEBLAZE
RATING: E10+

Strafing & Slaying

DOOM 64

DOOM WAS ONE of the first games I ever played with another person. While the Atari 2600 and the NES were my weapons of choice as a budding gaming hobbyist, it wasn't until DOOM that I really had the chute to interact with someone else.

"Wait, DOOM isn't a multiplayer game by trade!" is probably what you're thinking. Well, there was a LAN mode, but I'm talking about another, more esoteric control mode. My uncle, who introduced me to the series, would move around, open doors and select weapons, while I pressed the "Ctrl" key and fired said weapons. While a lot of people are probably bored out of their minds at the prospect, as a kid who was allowed to play an ostensibly violent video game, it was the dream.

Several years later, I ended up playing those local multiplayer modes in DOOM and Duke Nukem 3D, cementing my love for old-school FPS games. So when any new DOOM entry came along, whether it was a full sequel or something devilishly weird like DOOM 64, I was there for it.

Although DOOM 64 wasn't universally beloved when it was released in 1997, slowly but surely a lot of hardcore franchise fans have come around to it. At its core, it's another DOOM in the same vein as the 1993 original. It comes, it sticks around a while to make your day better, and it leaves. It's still just as old-school now as it was in the 20th century.

I have to say, though, even picking up DOOM 64 on the Nintendo Switch was a refreshing experience. I went to the eShop, hit "buy," it downloaded in 20 seconds and, before I knew it, I was already playing. Oh, and it was only five bucks for the privilege, plus it didn't have all that nasty Bethesda account business at launch that plagued the other DOOM Switch rereleases! Wonderful.

Again, this is old-school DOOM and I am here for it. You start the game, you get 32 levels (plus an extra one for this port) and several difficulty settings, and that's it. There's no multiplayer here in this version (as was expected) — just a creature-blasting simulator.

The DOOM 64 level design philosophy is all over the place, mostly in a good way. Some stages are five minutes if you rush for the critical path, but are packed to the gills with secrets. Some are longer by nature and offer up more pathing and puzzle-like mechanics. If you die, you simply restart and try again. No big loss. It's very much in the same spirit as the original games, but the designs and aesthetics feel a little different. Not off-brand, but different, especially when you start picking up classic reworked items like the light amplification visor that are only used for a few moments. It's weird like that!

DOOM 64 is a time capsule, but one worth digging back up. If you can stand really retro sensibilities and just want to blast some demons for a weekend, it's worth its value meal price. **— CHRIS**

8.0

SWITCH PUBLISHER: BETHESDA DEVELOPERS: ID SOFTWARE & NIGHTDIVE STUDIOS RATING: M

Sidescrolling & Slicing

MONONOKE SLASHDOWN

THERE'S NOTHING WRONG with a short game. As a community, gamers are often obsessed with getting the most possible play hours out of any new purchase, as if more time spent playing equals better value for money — but games like Mononoke Slashdown show what happens when a simple premise is pushed too far for the sake of a longer experience.

Mononoke Slashdown is a charming little beat-'em-up set in feudal Japan. The title character, Mononoke, has to stop an invading force of cartoonish monsters that threatens a group of peaceful farming villages. While the game pretends that there's a grand narrative to all the action, every level boils down to the same core gameplay loop: hack and slash through waves of enemies without taking too much damage.

This process is simple, if a little repetitive. The player starts with only the most basic of attacks unlocked, so there's a lot of tapping the same button over and over to clear screens. New attacks can be bought with gold that the player earns from clearing a stage, but these aren't strictly necessary for the majority of the levels — just keep tapping X and, eventually, you'll win.

While the game's artwork is beautiful (I'm always a sucker for hand-drawn sprites), the presentation feels a little rough around the edges. This is particularly noticeable with the game's amateur localization — text boxes are plagued with grammatical mistakes that suggest the game's translator probably isn't a native English speaker. Strangely, this does lend the game an earnest appeal, as if it's a schlocky martial arts movie from the '70s.

The gameplay and the art come together to form an enjoyable if very simple action game. I was having a pretty good time . . . until I got to the second boss fight.

Unfortunately, buried in this relatively simple hack-and-slash game, there's an equally basic RPG equipment system. You can upgrade your armor and weapons over time to deal more damage and endure more of a beating before death, which, naturally, means that enemies get tougher over time to account for your stronger gear.

Boss fights don't so much provide a difficulty spike as a level spike. With far more HP and far greater attack power than any other foes in the game, they're nigh impossible to beat unless you level up your equipment. Sadly, the game doesn't give you enough gold for each completed stage to purchase relevant gear before each boss, and, as such, if you want to keep playing, you've got to grind. Cue a montage of playing the same levels over and over in order to scrape together the requisite cash to actually defeat a boss. This is a tedious process that rapidly sucks all of the joy out of stages that were entirely harmless the first time I had to play them.

Mononoke Slashdown commits one of the cardinal sins of game design: It does not respect the player's time. **— MATTHEW L.**

5.5

SWITCH PUBLISHER: ARC SYSTEM WORKS DEVELOPER: F K DIGITAL RATING: E10+

Pedal Pals KNIGHTS AND BIKES

THIS MANIC BUT charming childhood romp from Double Fine has a well-thought-out story told from kid's perspectives that weaves reality and imagination to provide an impressive experience. The eShop's trailer may make your ears bleed, and much of the presentation is unorthodox, but once you dive in it's hard to stop.

I found the art style fresh and new, and while my initial worry was that it might detract from navigation, it did not. The characters are fun and full of life. The brooding and enigmatic Nessa stows away on a ship and meets Demelza, a young red-headed spitfire, at the docks of Penfurzy Island. Most of the adults in the game have their own motives and pay the kids no mind, but many have a role to play — whether it be vendor, boss battle or menace.

You start out in a tutorial-laden golf course to learn basic techniques and the exposition of the curse and the knight's treasure, and the girls set off on a quest to find the treasure.

Each area has sections where Demelza projects her own imagination onto the landscape, making wire fences into castle walls or stones into graves. You'll continuously be trying to decipher what is real and what is imaginary, and the game blurs the two quite well. My boys found some of the story overwhelming and a little scary, but not enough to stop.

Gameplay is all co-op action, but can be played solo. Enemies are dispatched with unconventional weapons like throwing discs and plungers, and sadly it seems easier to use Nessa's ranged weapons than Demelza's close-range offerings. The difficulty spikes between sections very quickly. Each new enemy brings a puzzle on how best to attack it.

The biking element is mostly for humor as you cannot attack on a bike, and it's somewhat odd having to spam a button to move, but as the game progresses the bikes become more important — and fun. Currency is spent on bike customization, but as you can't see many of the changes in-game, it's an odd addition.

The rest of the game is figuring out where to go, and that can be tedious. While Captain Honkers — your loyal goose — often leads you to your destination, it's easy to miss a hole, a road or other map elements. If you miss a bit of dialogue or misconstrue a clue, you could be waylaid for a frustrating amount of time.

On the other side of the coin, if the puzzles were too easy to deconstruct, it wouldn't be as rewarding to solve them. Some of the puzzles just boiled down to being in the right place to initiate a key piece of dialogue, though.

The game is a brilliant modernization of the fantasy genre. It has a "Stranger Things" vibe, but it's not nearly as intense or violent as that show. Common game elements are replaced with hilarious bits — like "high fives" as a way to heal wounds and the sounds the girls make while running. It's just a joy to experience, especially because it deals subtly with big topics like alcoholism, debt, sexual identity, anxiety and the occult with levity and innocence.

While it may not have much replay value, the experience and dialogue of Knights and Bikes packs a punch. **— BRETT**

9.0

SWITCH PUBLISHER: DOUBLE FINE
DEVELOPER: FOAM SWORD GAMES RATING: E10+

Taking Flight Once More

SEGA AGES: FANTASY ZONE

SEVERAL OF M2'S offerings in the Sega Ages line have seen previous releases from the team in the form of Sega's 3D Classics line for the Nintendo 3DS, and, in this, Fantasy Zone is no different. In fact, if you've played that version of the very first adventure of the company's original video game mascot, then Sega Ages: Fantasy Zone is going to look very familiar to you. But that isn't to say that nothing has changed as Opa-Opa has made the jump from Nintendo's 3D handheld to their hybrid console!

An early entry in the "cute-'em-up" genre (like shoot-'em-ups, only . . . you know, *cute*), Fantasy Zone follows Opa-Opa on his journey to stop the forces of the planet Menon from stealing all the currencies from various worlds so that they can fund a space fortress. As such, collecting money is a key aspect of the Fantasy Zone gameplay experience.

The game borrows from Defender, in that rather than simply moving from left to right or from bottom to top as in most shooters, you're able to dictate where you go throughout courses that loop back around on a scrolling horizontal plane. In addition to ensuring your own safety by dodging enemy forces, your goal is to destroy the 10 enemy-deploying bases scattered throughout each stage, which then draws the boss of the area out for a showdown (the left-to-right movement is more traditional in these sections).

As you destroy enemies and bases, coins will drop. Gathering them is what allows you to make the most of visits to the free-floating shops in each area, where you can stock up on a variety of power-ups that can influence everything from how your weapons behave to the speed of your ship.

Newer features include the ability to "Display Details," which gives you a variety of useful stats, including how much money you've accumulated, how many bases have been destroyed, who the boss of the area is and a map. You can also activate "base markers," which prompt cartoon-styled gloves to point you toward your objectives.

The 3D Classics version featured numerous unlockables, granted by acquiring certain amounts of money which numbered in the millions of dollars, but M2 dialed things back for Sega Ages, and they can now be had for significantly smaller sums. The two alternate bosses from the Master System version of the game also return here, to be fought under certain conditions.

The biggest difference is the inclusion of Upa-Upa Mode. That is, it *was* in the 3D Classics version, but you couldn't experience it unless you beat the game — no easy feat. When playing as Opa-Opa's brother, you pick whichever class of engine you like, and you can choose from any of the weapons normally in the game's shop. So, what's the catch? You're only allowed to fire shots from them as long as you can afford it; otherwise, you're back to your basic weapon.

Even if shoot-'em-ups aren't normally your thing, Fantasy Zone is definitely worth forking over the cash to check out. **— DAVID**

9.0

SWITCH PUBLISHER: SEGA
DEVELOPERS: SEGA & M2 RATING: E

Shinobi's Back!

SEGA AGES: SHINOBI

9.0

WHILE IT MAY not be as evident now as it once was, Shinobi was once one of the pillars of Sega. An iconic action series whose last all-new title was Shinobi for the Nintendo 3DS (which I recommend, provided you can track down a copy; it currently remains unavailable in the eShop), its legacy nowadays is more in its consistent presence within the various Sega Genesis collections the companies have released over the years.

Even then, that only tends to cover the 16-bit titles. Shinobi III: Return of the Ninja Master tends to get the lion's share of the attention, with The Revenge of Shinobi and Shadow Dancer: The Secret of Shinobi following close behind. But much like the original Street Fighter, the first game in the Shinobi series is a little bit of a rarer find. While Shinobi III got the 3D Classics treatment on the 3DS, M2 instead decided to give Joe Musashi's original adventure some time to shine as a part of the Sega Ages collection on the Switch.

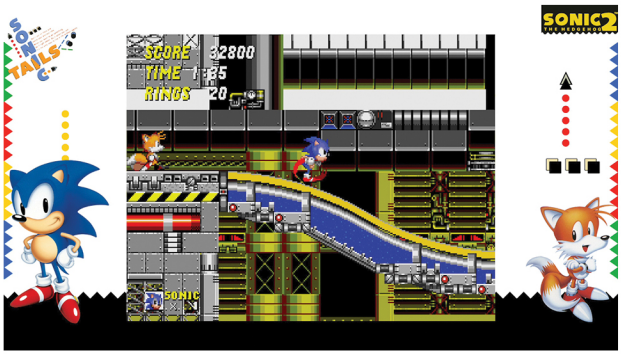
The gameplay involves progressing through each of the five missions presented to you, eliminating enemies as you attempt to rescue all of the children kidnapped from Musashi's ninja clan. This involves not only leaping over pits and obstacles, but using a high jump to ascend to the tops of walls as well, much like Bandai Namco's Rolling Thunder. Your primary means of attack is throwing shuriken, while punches and kicks will deal with any foes who venture too close. Rescuing certain hostages will power up Joe's attacks to explosive bullets and katana strikes, and when it seems like the enemy is too much for one man to handle, performing a ninjutsu technique will clear the screen to even the score.

While Shinobi is a fairly challenging game, this Sega Ages release features many options that allow players to fine-tune the challenge more to their liking. Four levels of difficulty are just the start, as you can also toggle the number of extra lives you'll receive on a credit up to five, and even the speed of enemy projectiles. Still not enough? Ages Mode will garb the ninja master in white, granting him an extra hit point of damage (it doesn't sound like much, but it is a real game-changer) and maximizing the power of his strikes. And if all else fails, there's "The Pinnacle of Ninjutsu," wherein time is rewound up to 12 clicks of the in-game clock by holding ZL or ZR. With all of this going for you, you might not even need the standard Sega Ages save states.

Not everything is perfect, though, but how much the other issues — nitpicks, really — affect you may vary. For instance, where the original version of the game featured images of Marilyn Monroe in the background of one stage, they've been changed here to show the werewolf from Altered Beast. And while Fantasy Zone incorporated elements of its home release into its Ages release, Musashi's wider array of ninja weapons didn't make the cut in this port.

Along with the usual suite of M2 features, including a visual setting that evokes playing an arcade machine, Shinobi is another can't-miss Sega Ages release. **— DAVID**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: SEGA
DEVELOPERS: SEGA & M2 RATING: E10+



The New Console Standard

SEGA AGES: SONIC THE HEDGEHOG 2

SONIC THE HEDGEHOG 2 is considered one of the greatest video games not only of the titles released on the Sega Genesis, but perhaps even the entire Sonic franchise and the generation it was a part of. M2 would go on to make the game even better with the 3D Classics release on the Nintendo 3DS, and they have once again managed to top themselves here as part of the Sega Ages collection on the Nintendo Switch.

Much of what was said about the original Sega Ages: Sonic the Hedgehog and 3D Classics Sonic the Hedgehog 2 can be said here, as its features are nearly identical. The biggest differences come in what was done to accentuate the content specific to the title itself. The previous Sega Ages release contained "Mega Play" mode, which was an arcade version of Sonic 1 that stripped out most of the slower stages and ramped up the difficulty by eliminating 1-Ups. As the Mega Tech/Mega Play release of Sonic 2 had fewer differences from the console release overall, M2 decided to offer something else: Knuckles the Echidna in Sonic the Hedgehog 2, a version of the game starring Rad Red that was originally only playable by using "Lock-On Technology" to plug the Sonic 2 cartridge into Sonic & Knuckles.

Another change is that, rather than clock your best time in beating the first stage, Challenge Mode now has you choose between Sonic and Knuckles (sorry, Tails — see you next game?), and you must instead race to the end of Emerald Hill Zone Act 1 while gathering 100 rings before reaching the goal.

Also worth noting is that like the 3D Classics release, Sega Ages: Sonic the Hedgehog 2 has an unlockable Super Sonic mode, gained by beating the game — a rather easy feat if you use the built-in stage select function.

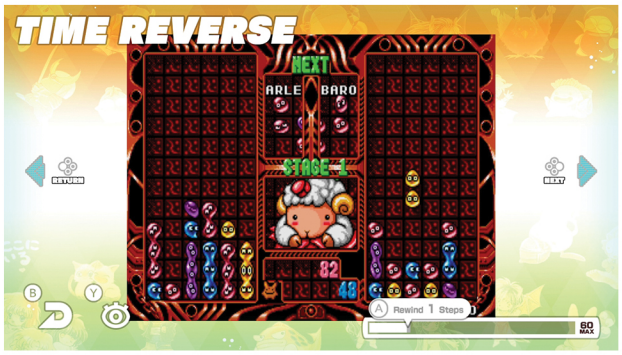
Unfortunately, there is a certain elephant in the room. As good as this release of Sonic 2 is, it doesn't quite reach the heights needed to be declared the definitive version of the game — that honor resides with Taxman and Stealth's (who you may recognize as two of the names behind Sonic Mania; their Sonic 2 port helped them get the Mania gig) remake of the game for mobile devices, which offers much of what's found in this package and more.

There had been talk from M2 of incorporating content that original Sonic 2 programmer Yuji Naka had been unable to include in the original release due to the limitations of the Genesis hardware, but sadly, this did not come to pass. If it had, then this might have been the equal of the mobile version of the game in a different way.

That said, here's the thing: That version of Sonic 2 is referred to here specifically as the mobile version on account of the fact that, unlike its older sibling, Taxman and Stealth's port of Sonic CD, it never came to PC or consoles. As such, while Sega Ages: Sonic the Hedgehog 2 isn't the best version of the game you can play, it *is* nevertheless the best version you're going to find on any home console today. **— DAVID**

9.0

SWITCH PUBLISHER: SEGA
DEVELOPERS: SEGA & M2 RATING: E



Another Avalanche of Mean Beans

SEGA AGES: PUYO PUYO 2

I'VE LIKED THE Puyo Puyo series of puzzle games for a long time, and admittedly, I've been bad at Puyo Puyo games for just as long. I'm committed to stepping up my Puyo-dropping skills, which is unusual for me: Usually when I'm bad at a puzzle game, I turn it off and nurse my bruised ego by playing something that doesn't require much thought or foresight.

Puyo Puyo's bright colors, fun characters and unique mechanics keep calling me back, which is why I was happy to jump on the Sega Ages arcade port of Puyo Puyo 2 for the Switch. Puyo Puyo 2 is fine. Heck, it's inherently great; it's Puyo Puyo. It's not a regrettable purchase if you've never played a Puyo game before (I don't think "Puyo Puyo" and "regrettable purchase" are words capable of going together, frankly), but it's not the best option on a system that already has the excellent Puyo Puyo Tetris.

The core concept driving Puyo Puyo 2, its predecessors and its successor is easy to grasp. Differently colored blobs, the titular "Puyo," drop from the top of the screen. When you match four of the same color, they disappear. As with Tetris, however, patience and foresight reaps great rewards. If you arrange your Puyos in such a way that clearing one color sets off a chain reaction that clears several groups, you rack up a huge score. Better still, you drop "garbage Puyo" on your opponent, which can greatly hinder their own combo-making strategies.

Puyo Puyo 2 plays much like the first game, though a new "offset rule" lets you counterattack when an opponent is about to drop a load of garbage Puyo on your board. Offsetting is an important addition to the Puyo series, and it's the best reason to choose Puyo Puyo 2 over Puyo Puyo in the Switch eShop. Otherwise, don't look for too many differences between the games.

I'm a little disappointed in M2's conversion work with Puyo Puyo 2. Again, like the first game, it's largely unlocalized, save for a bonus screen that fills you in on the series' iconic cast of characters. (Puyo Puyo's heroine, Arle Nadja, is the GOAT.) Most Westerners are still trying to get a handle on Puyo Puyo, so starting up the game and getting slapped in the face with a wall of untranslated "How To" text is discouraging.

If you're a serious Puyo Puyo nut who's always on the hunt for the next blob-dropping challenge, Puyo Puyo 2 feeds you more of what you crave. It's hard to recommend for Puyo Puyo newbies, though. You're much better off spending a little more money to secure Puyo Puyo Tetris, a jam-packed crossover that patiently teaches you the way of the Puyo while also offering great graphics, a surprisingly charming story and a wide variety of gameplay modes.

As I admitted some paragraphs ago, I'm bad at Puyo Puyo but aim to get better because I enjoy the mechanics so much. Puyo Puyo 2 is not a patient teacher, though you might feel differently if you're the kind of person who learned to swim by jumping in the deep end. **— NADIA**

7.0

SWITCH PUBLISHER: SEGA
DEVELOPERS: SEGA & M2 RATING: E

8.0

18 Hot-Blooded 8-Bit Battles

DOUBLE DRAGON & KUNIO-KUN: RETRO BRAWLER BUNDLE

THE RIVER CITY series was all but dead in the West up until a decade ago, while the Kunio-kun series upon which it was based continued to flourish in Japan. Today, you can't sneeze without tripping over a new chapter in this hot-blooded saga of high school delinquents. What better way to celebrate this newfound global saturation than by revisiting the franchise's 8-bit roots?

Double Dragon & Kunio-kun: Retro Brawler Bundle delivers the goods better than most throwback collections, even if its name is slightly misleading. See, though the Lee brothers have earned top billing, the included Double Dragon trilogy is merely a side act. Furthermore, while the Kunio-kun brand may best be known for sidescrolling brawler action, 10 of the 18 featured titles are technically sports games — albeit infused with surprisingly deep combat far unlike conventional athletic sims.

In addition to Double Dragon I, II and III, we've got Renegade, Super Dodge Ball, River City Ransom and Crash 'n the Boys: Street Challenge — the full lineup of Kunio-kun titles localized for NES, minus Nintendo World Cup (likely excluded since it's published by Nintendo outside of Japan). And the other 11? Why, they're formerly Famicom-exclusive gems, all translated into English for the first time!

The few games to cross the Pacific decades ago were stripped of their cultural identity — characters and items were renamed and graphics altered in favor of an American street gang facade — but there's something just so much more appealing about the original "yanki" aesthetic. Beyond visual changes, the originals sport different narratives and unique cutscenes to make playing through both styles well worth the effort.

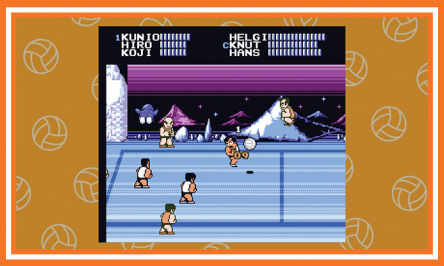
These games pushed the limits of the NES/Famicom, making them tough to revisit 30 years later. Thankfully, Arc System Works did what they could to iron out the wrinkles. Since the original control schemes were restricted to two buttons, jumping required pushing both A and B simultaneously. Here, the R Button serves as an A+B combo shortcut, and all buttons can be rebound for your comfort and convenience. Most of the titles are even presented in "Quality Up" versions that squash critical bugs, reduce lag and flicker and alter game balance — playing Super Dodge Ball used to be like trundling through mud, but now it runs at a speed best described as "adequate!"

One thing I couldn't test was the online mode, if only because no one else on Earth seemed to be playing whenever I was. Also, for some odd reason, returning to the main Switch menu doesn't halt the action, meaning you can press Home and set your controller aside to eat lunch or whatever, then return and be greeted by a Game Over screen. That's an unfortunate error, but Double Dragon & Kunio-kun: Retro Brawler Bundle otherwise demonstrates a level of commitment toward celebrating a franchise's legacy that puts other port-happy publishers to shame. **— TONY**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: ARC SYSTEM WORKS RATING: E10+

NEKKETSU RENEGADE KUNIO-KUN

Given a makeover to resemble The Warriors and renamed Renegade for Western markets, this no-frills, single-screen brawler kicked off the entire Kunio-kun saga. Its milestone status ultimately doesn't excuse it for being a dreadfully dull exercise in any region.



NEKKETSU HIGH SCHOOL DODGEBALL CLUB

Also known as Super Dodge Ball, this is the first of many sports spin-offs in the franchise. There's fun to be had, though it's bogged down by debilitating flicker and slowdown in its "Original" form. The "Quality Up" version mitigates these issues, but only somewhat.

DOWNTOWN NEKKETSU STORY

The centerpiece of the entire package, the non-Americanized River City Ransom is a must-play hybrid of brawler and RPG. But like its overseas counterpart, building stats by consuming food with benefits that are unknown until after you buy them is just as dumb.

NEKKETSU HIGH SCHOOL DODGEBALL CLUB - SOCCER STORY

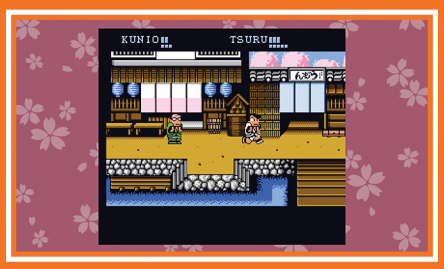
Featuring charming cutscenes removed from Nintendo World Cup, this twist on soccer tosses decorum out the window in favor of full-contact carnage! Ordering teammates indirectly via button commands is odd, though.

MAKING THEIR ENGLISH DEBUT

When Kunio-kun: The World Classics Collection arrived in Japan just over a year ago, it included seven English-only titles as a bonus. Since the Retro Brawler Bundle is the exact same package only with full translations for the 11 Japanese originals, we actually scored the better deal for a change! Granted, five of the imported wares did see Western release — heavily doctored though they may have been — but that still leaves a plate of six exotic delicacies to sample for the first time. Additionally, it felt odd that the localizations carried no unified branding to easily alert players who wished to follow the adventures of "Alex" . . . or "Crash" . . . or whatever his name was that year. So being able to at last enjoy the early years of the Kunio-kun series with a consistent cast and narrative is simply refreshing!

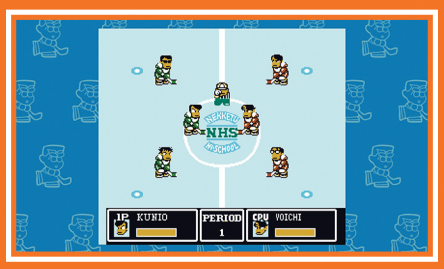
DOWNTOWN NEKKETSU MARCH SUPER-AWESOME FIELD DAY!

Foot races through people's homes! Obstacle courses inside factories! Battle royales on precipitous rooftops! The first totally new game in this bundle is unlike any field day your school may have held!



DOWNTOWN SPECIAL KUNIO-KUN'S HISTORICAL PERIOD DRAMA!

A proper sequel to Downtown Nekketsu Story in the guise of a school play, this fascinating gem features new abilities, an A.I. partner and improved stat-building — but navigating its Byzantine map is mind-numbing.

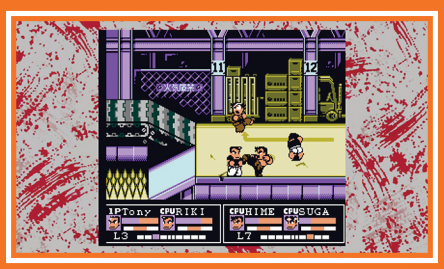


GO-GO! NEKKETSU HOCKEY CLUB SLIP-AND-SLIDE MADNESS

This was almost localized as Crash 'n the Boys: Ice Challenge, yet was curiously canceled. It uses an indirect orders system like Soccer Story but overall feels stiff compared to other NES hockey titles.

SURPRISE! NEKKETSU NEW RECORDS! THE DISTANT GOLD MEDAL

Surprise! It's Crash 'n the Boys: Street Challenge! You can compete in a bevy of track and field events, but the overwhelming volume of techniques to master is sure to trip up newcomers.

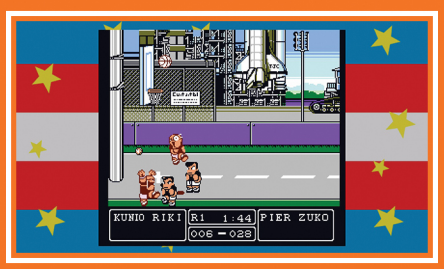


NEKKETSU FIGHTING LEGEND

Match after match of two-on-two and free-for-all tourney battles in all manner of locales with an avalanche of weapons! The combination of speedy combat and unique skills makes every playthrough an absolute blast. It's the experience Renegade wishes it could be!

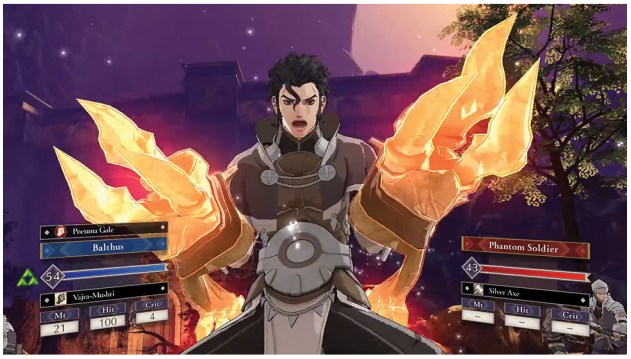
KUNIO-KUN'S NEKKETSU SOCCER LEAGUE

This direct follow-up to Soccer Story gives you more brawling techniques and orders for your A.I. teammates, as you'd expect. The big game-changer, though, is the new weather system — wind can affect the ball's trajectory, lightning can stun players and so on!



NEKKETSU! STREET BASKETBALL ALL-OUT DUNK HEROES

Triple the hoops means triple the likelihood of getting dunked on by the CPU! Of all the bundled games, this final 8-bit Kunio title has the steepest learning curve.



Continuing Education

FIRE EMBLEM: THREE HOUSES EXPANSION PASS

WHILE IT WASN'T one of my most anticipated Switch releases, after actually sitting down with it for a while, Fire Emblem: Three Houses became one of my favorite games on the platform to date.

I can't stress how good it feels to enjoy Fire Emblem on a giant screen then quickly take it on the go, just as I have for the last few decades with this series. The "perfect on Switch" mantra gets thrown around so often that it's become a meme at this point, but for Fire Emblem, it's absolutely true. Three Houses specifically kept me going for three playthroughs right around its launch — having a game hold my interest for that long hardly ever happens. Now I've just gone for a fourth run with the DLC. Thankfully, it mostly went swimmingly.

The Expansion Pass is a tricky thing to navigate. Somewhat confusingly, it rolled out in "waves" like prior 3DS Passes, but given how quickly things move in this game from a narrative standpoint (no spoilers!), all of that could be in flux depending on where you are in the story. So let's take it wave by wave, shall we?

Wave 1 offers Officers Academy outfits for both versions of Byleth. Well, that don't impress me much!

Wave 2 had a different approach: five auxiliary battles (which mostly feel like sidequests, but are appreciated if you need something else to do with your day-to-day-routine), as well as new battle background music (there's so much to choose from already!), four stat-boosting items (yawn), then new attire for students and glasses for Byleth.

You might be salivating at the prospect of more outfits for your protagonist — I appreciate that. Depending on the situation, I'm very much into cosmetics myself. But given that a lot of this content is ostensibly functioning as paid unlocks, whereas old-school games would provide them as clear bonuses, it's still not all that enticing, especially for the $25 asking price of the Pass.

Wave 3 starts to bring out the big guns, bumping up the allure of the monastery — one of my favorite hub zones of all time. You can not only recruit a new character (Anna), but acquire new maid and butler battalions (which are way more thematic than text-based items), as well as more student attire and . . . wait for it . . . a sauna for the hub and the chance to interact with animals.

For some people, that last bit is going to be a mic drop. But in many respects, it still feels like stuff that could have been added with free updates. Yet, Wave 4 almost single-handedly justifies the Pass (I also don't want to look a gift horse in the mouth, as the free updates have been fantastic and expansive).

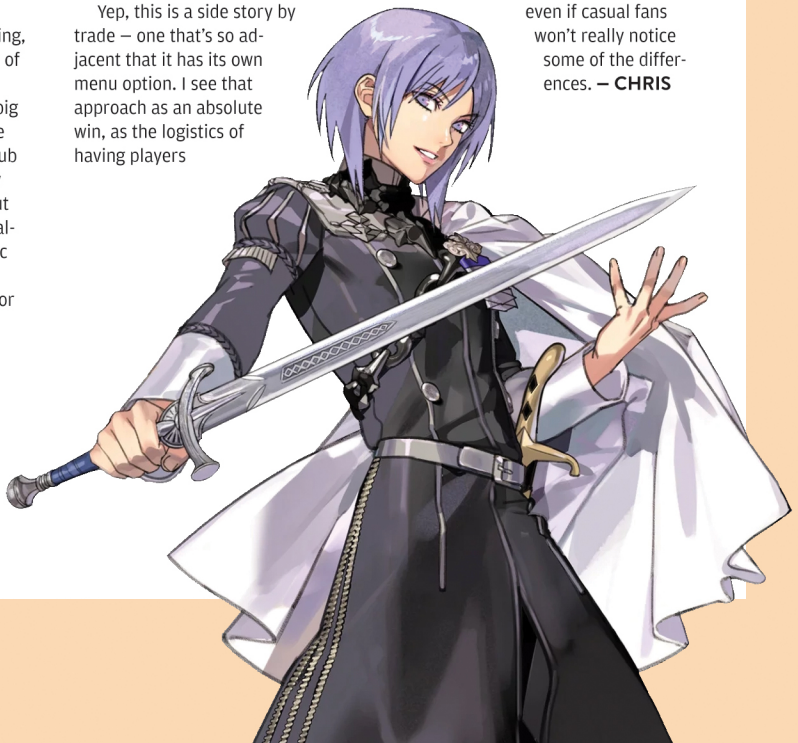
This time around, Wave 4 delivers a complete expansion. You get to travel to a brand-new area (the Abyss) within the monastery (love how it's still grounded), recruit four brand-new characters that live in the aforementioned area (the Ashen Wolves) and partake in a completely original and separate storyline.

Yep, this is a side story by trade — one that's so adjacent that it has its own menu option. I see that approach as an absolute win, as the logistics of having players comb through the story to find a point when they could access the content would be a nightmare with how divergent it is halfway through. Veterans will really appreciate the hardcore feel of it all, complete with finite resources that don't allow endless grinding to best the relatively challenging missions. While the story pales in comparison to the main campaign, the rewards are worth it, as they directly add more to said campaign and drastically enhance future playthroughs. It's an investment.

There are two main things to consider here with the Fire Emblem: Three Houses Expansion Pass. Did you spend literal hours scouring the monastery? The Pass livens things up a bit for your future playthroughs, as this gigantic game just got a lot bigger. In the grand scheme of things the sum of its parts makes for a fuller Fire Emblem, even if casual fans won't really notice some of the differences. **— CHRIS**

8.5

DLC PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPERS: INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS & KOEI TECMO RATING: T



The Return of Katarn

STAR WARS JEDI KNIGHT II: JEDI OUTCAST

A LONG TIME AGO, before Jyn Erso and Rogue One took credit for stealing the Death Star plans, that honor belonged to a man named Kyle Katarn. The Dark Forces series of first-person shooters were essentially DOOM clones, all slathered with a nice Star Wars coat of paint.

Then came Episode I, and, suddenly, fans demanded something different from Star Wars games. Instead of running and gunning, swinging a lightsaber became all the rage, and Kyle needed to upskill.

Jedi Knight II: Jedi Outcast is, therefore, a first-person shooter which transitions jarringly into a third-person lightsaber simulator part way through. To claim that the game has aged poorly would only tell half the story, as the Quake III engine is being made to do things that it was never designed to do.

It's probably worth mentioning that Jedi Outcast is very much a PC game. While the game was also released on the GameCube when it was new, it was designed for a keyboard and mouse — players were supposed to be able to click on an enemy with pinpoint accuracy and watch them fall. The analog stick is nowhere near as easy to guide. Publisher Aspyr Media has mapped the camera to the Switch's motion controls, so it's possible to line up a shot by moving the Switch around, but this still isn't quite as simple as using a mouse.

For the first few missions, you'll slowly, cautiously take down enemy Stormtroopers with a variety of clumsy, random blasters. Then, if you can endure that for long enough, you'll find yourself leaping from platform to platform as a Jedi, cutting through opponents as if you're a young Obi-Wan Kenobi facing off against battle droids.

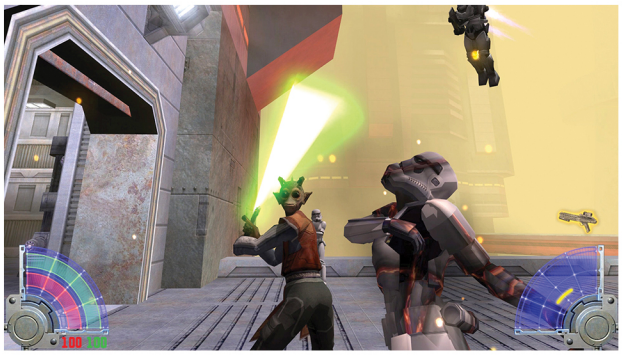
At all times, this combat and traversal is awkward to say the least. First-person platforming is never easy, and this game makes you do it constantly. Even once you get a lightsaber and the camera shifts behind your shoulder, leaping across the level geometry can feel like guesswork.

The lightsaber combat in Jedi Outcast is similarly plagued by the fact that this is technically a first-person shooter. Holding down the trigger will cause Kyle to swing his laser sword around almost at random, and it's not so much a matter of pointing at an enemy and stabbing them as it is driving a flailing Kyle in the direction of an opponent and hoping for the best. Nevertheless, it should be said that this game provides the one piece of catharsis that fans have always desired from a Star Wars game: If you slice at someone's arm, the arm comes off. Lightsabers actually cut, and that goes a long way to selling the experience of being a cool space hero.

I can't really recommend Jedi Outcast to newcomers. For fans of a certain age, though, it drips with nostalgia, both for PC gaming at the turn of the century and the Star Wars Expanded Universe before Disney threw much of the saga's old lore into the garbage chute. This game may not look like much, but she's got it where it counts, kid. **— MATTHEW L.**

7.5

SWITCH PUBLISHER: ASPYR
DEVELOPERS: RAVEN SOFTWARE & ASPYR RATING: T



Learn How to Be a Jedi

STAR WARS JEDI KNIGHT: JEDI ACADEMY

A LONG TIME AGO, before Kylo Ren trashed the place, Luke Skywalker ran a Jedi training school. Jedi Knight: Jedi Academy leaves series protagonist Kyle Katarn on the sidelines to instead focus on one of his students.

Jedi Academy runs on the same engine as Jedi Outcast, and, as such, imports many of its flaws. Combat is literally hit-and-miss, and a greater emphasis on platforming this time around can lead to gritted teeth and cheap deaths at the hands of inaccurate controls.

Thankfully, Academy also solves one of Outcast's biggest problems by ditching the first-person shooter aspect of the game almost entirely. You play as Jaden Korr, a customizable hero of indeterminate species and gender, who has earned a spot at Luke's academy by achieving the impossible: constructing a new lightsaber without training. As such, right from the start you're swinging a lightsaber and practicing Force powers, and the result is a game that's still frustrating at times, but far more accessible to newcomers.

The focus on lightsaber combat is apparent in many elements of Academy's design, including three different lightsaber styles to choose from (strong, balanced and fast), and even the option to dual-wield two lightsabers, or to fight with a double-bladed saber, à la Darth Maul.

The game also features a more open level select system than Jedi Outcast. Instead of a linear progression through various stages, Academy lets the player choose from a series of bite-sized missions that can be played in any order. This means the levels contain less plot, but they really sell the experience of being a wandering Jedi, helping out the locals wherever you're needed.

In spite of its flaws, wading through Jedi Academy's single-player campaign is the most fun I've had playing games thus far this year. I constantly cackled with glee as I took the heads off Stormtroopers, or let loose a volley of lightning on a Sith opponent. Jedi Outcast makes the player feel like Luke Skywalker, shakily relying on guns while slowly building up a selection of Force powers. Jedi Academy makes the player feel like Anakin Skywalker, effortlessly breezing through wave after wave of bad guys without too much effort.

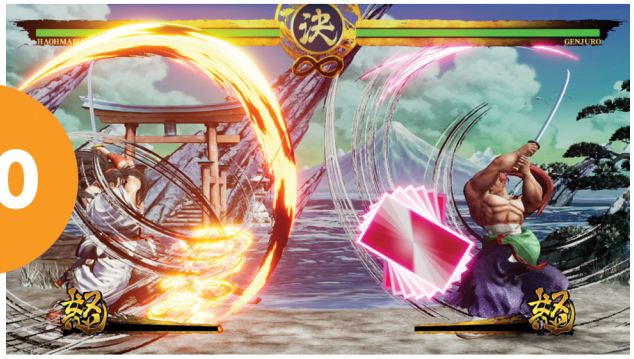
In addition to its single-player campaign, Academy also boasts extensive online play. This is the quintessential Quake-style PC multiplayer of years gone by — there are deathmatch options and the ever-popular Capture the Flag. There are also some very Star Wars-inspired multiplayer modes, such as Power Duel, a two-on-one match that recreates the Duel of the Fates fight from The Phantom Menace.

While purists may prefer Jedi Knight II, I feel that Jedi Academy is a far more accessible starting point for anyone who wants to try out the series on Switch. The only major downside is the price: Academy is twice the price of Outcast. Nevertheless, it's currently the definitive Star Wars experience on the Switch. *This* is where the fun begins. **— MATTHEW L.**

8.0

SWITCH PUBLISHER: ASPYR
DEVELOPERS: RAVEN SOFTWARE & ASPYR RATING: T

8.0



The Original Sword Fighter Returns

SAMURAI SHODOWN

LONG BEFORE SMASH BROS. was inundated with larger-than-life, sword-swinging warriors, in a time when the "anime fighter" subgenre was not yet populated with the likes of BlazBlue and Guilty Gear, the only place to see a man with bright blue hair stab a fella who can shoot fireballs from his hands was the Samurai Shodown series. Now the franchise is back on Nintendo consoles with a new sequel for the first time since 2009, and though it doesn't shine as brightly as it did in its wonder years, it still more than cuts the mustard.

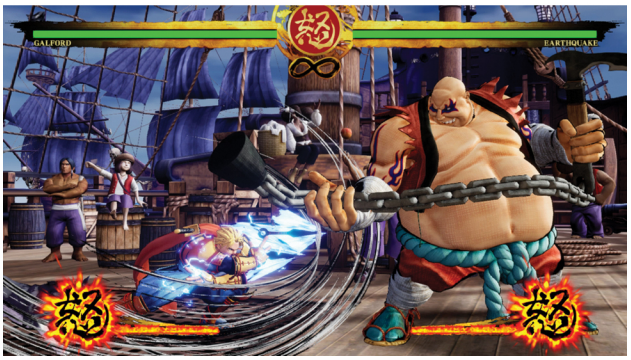
So how does this legacy manage to validate its own existence in an era of gaming that's overflowing with options for blade-based fighters? In short, it keeps things simple and deadly. Like in a real sword fight, some rounds will be over in just two or three hits. Not every character is easily capable of that, with some being more inclined toward stringing together a series of quick, light attacks into combos, or keeping attackers at a distance as they peck away from afar — but compared to most fighters on the market today, Samurai Shodown sets itself apart with its severity. It's far from a realistic simulation of how fights to the death used to happen in 18th century Japan. While Haohmaru, Jubei, Hanzo and a few others here are based on actual historical figures from that era, 10-foot tall, 600-pound farting ninjas like Earthquake are entirely fictional. What's painfully real here are the stakes. Make one false move and you're on the chopping block. Likewise, if you play your cards right, you can survive against even the sharpest opponents.

Unfortunately, the visuals aren't as cutting edge — Samurai Shodown used to be known for its impressive graphics with expressive and energetic art that looked great in still images and in motion. This new outing doesn't fare as well, especially in screenshots. When you get up close and personal, it's clear that SNK just didn't put a ton of money into these 3D models. Fortunately, everything looks a heck of a lot better in actual gameplay. Other than the occasional framerate hiccup (which is more of an issue on Switch than other platforms), the game's animations look fantastic. The playable cast is packed with attacks that burst with life as they dish out death to those unfortunate souls on their receiving ends.

Speaking of the roster, it starts off on the small side with a mere 16 playable combatants: 13 hailing from prior games and three who were designed from the ground up for this new entry. That's a little light compared with the 41 fighters in Samurai Shodown VI. Additional characters are being released via DLC on a regular basis, which is a mixed blessing. They're each welcome additions, but acquiring all of them will cost you a whole lot of extra money, which feels excessive given that the base game is $50.

That high price is offset by one of the coolest pre-order bonuses on the Switch: a port of Samurai Shodown! 2, an entirely different entry in the series which up until now has only been available on the Neo Geo Pocket Color. (Some game stores may still have those pre-order bonus codes on hand, so call around if you're interested. If we're lucky, SNK will put that game up for sale by itself in the eShop eventually.) Regardless of if you end up with one or both of these games, get ready for some deep cuts and even deeper gameplay. It's not the best fighter on Switch, but it's definitely the most brutal. **— JONATHAN**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: SNK
RATING: M



Back on Dragonback

PANZER DRAGOON: REMAKE

TIMES ARE TOUGH and the future is uncertain. Maybe what we need is a relic from a bygone era, bursting with renewed power, ready to take us on a wild adventure? These are the questions posed to the player at the start of Panzer Dragoon.

In the opening cinematic, a giant techno-organic beast comes out of nowhere to take you on a soaring, action-packed tour of a vast, post-apocalyptic landscape. Nicknamed after the sword-wielding 17th century British cavalry, this horn-headed blue dragon appears to be the star of the show at first — but before long, you'll realize that the environment and the bestiary are the real draws here.

Once a marquee title for the ill-fated Sega Saturn, Panzer Dragoon is mostly about just taking in the sights. That's part of why it never really grew to be as popular as its progenitor Space Harrier, or competing franchises like Star Fox. In a lot of ways, it feels more like Pokémon Snap than anything else, except instead of taking pics of various exotic creatures, you're taking them down with fireballs and homing lasers.

That's where Panzer Dragoon's signature gameplay hook comes in. You can spin the camera around to face north, south, east or west. That might not sound like a big deal now, but back in 1995, it was huge! So were the massive monsters you had to take down, many of which look like they hopped straight out of a classic, pre-Totoro Studio Ghibli film.

There are also a lot of connections to the Dune series of novels — specifically, many of the environments, characters and enemies are lifted straight from the work of Moebius, the legendary French illustrator who worked closely with director Alejandro Jodorowsky on a film adaptation of Dune that was too untamed to ever see the light of day.

Most assumed that Panzer Dragoon was also to be shuttered in the shadows forever. The fact that an independent studio has rereleased the game on Switch with visuals that come closer to meeting modern standards is nothing short of a miracle.

That's why I'm so conflicted about this review. The Panzer Dragoon series is like an old friend that disappeared for almost 20 years. Now it's back . . . but it's not quite back to its old self.

Your dragon beats its wings so hard now that it's almost constantly bobbing up and down on the screen, and when you swing the camera around, it moves a lot slower than it used to. These two seemingly small issues can easily get you shot.

There's also no option to play with the old graphics, which — despite their age — still have value. But the original soundtrack is still here, and it's as fantastic as ever!

As for new features, there's a photography mode, the option to play with twin sticks that makes moving independent from aiming and the promise of some additional perks to be added later via patches. It's too bad that they weren't able to add to the game's overall length, though — it's still all over in a little over an hour. For a $25 digital download in 2020, that's a tough pill to swallow.

That said, it's still a fantastic re-introduction to this once-thought-extinct breed of Sega animal. Selfishly, I want this title to succeed so that we'll also get remakes of the better games in the series, especially Panzer Dragoon Saga, one of the best RPGs ever made. This enhanced port of the original title may not be a strong enough game to fully transport most players, but it's hopefully the first footstep (or in this case, wingflap) toward flying back into the larger Panzer Dragoon world.

— JONATHAN

SWITCH PUBLISHER: FOREVER ENTERTAINMENT DEVELOPER: MEGAPIXEL STUDIO RATING: T

7.0

LIVE BY THE SWORD

Video game heroes would be nothing without legendary weapons to wield. Here are our picks for the 20 best blades of all time!

THE SWORD OF MANA

THROUGHOUT THE STORIED history of the Seiken Densetsu series, the Sword of Mana plays a vital role.

In most of the games, it is the item that the hero must obtain to defeat the evil in the world, much like many other video game blades.

The blade tends to reside at the base of the Mana Tree, but that isn't always the case. This sword can go eons without use, and often rusts to the point of nearly breaking. However, any who hold it are changed both in fate and in character.

Does the man make the sword or does the sword make the man?

Trials that vary in scope prove that the hero should wield the sword, and once those are undertaken and overcome, the sword becomes very powerful and able to smite the evil that threatens the world's Mana. This Mana always becomes imperiled by those who would use it for evil, and the Mana Sword is the key to reversing those evil plans, sometimes by defeating the legendary Mana Beast that comes to destroy Mana.

The hero has traditionally gone to great lengths to reach the sword toward the end of each adventure, but in Secret of Mana, Randi pulls the sword out of a rock to defend himself mere minutes after the beginning of the game! **— BRETT**

THE MASTER SWORD

THE MASTER SWORD has always been a part of Hyrule. In fact, the much-ballyhooed blade shows up in more games than even Ganon does, making it the third most important "character" in the series — though it didn't get a voice of its own until the 2010 release of Skyward Sword.

When fans heard that the second all-new Zelda game for Wii would tell the tale of the Master Sword's origins, fans flipped their lids. Sadly, that sentiment soon soured. The one-to-one motion controls were a rude awakening for many who fancied themselves masters of blades. Where other games let them pretend to be skilled in edged combat, Skyward Sword constantly reminded them that real life was a different story.

Even more intrusive was Fi, the oftentimes chatty spirit of the sword. Her tendency to "cut" into the game's action at inopportune times got on a lot of people's nerves. Though, personally, I adore her and her impassioned interruptions. Not only is she one of the coolest-looking Zelda characters ever designed, but her innocent, protective personality perfectly embodies the pure, parental attitude of Nintendo's Iwata era. She's like Siri with a serrated edge — a robotic personal assistant who doubles as a monster assassin, then triples as a magical metal detector! **— JONATHAN**

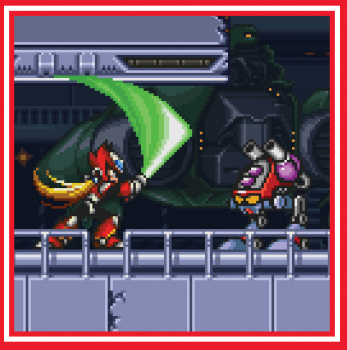
THE Z-SABER

IT'S IRONIC THAT the weapon Zero would become best known for wielding would be one he never originally had.

When the Maverick Hunter first appeared in Mega Man X, he was only armed with a Buster curiously identical in appearance to the one X could receive from his creator, Dr. Light. It wouldn't be until his second chance at life in Mega Man X2, when the Reploid scientist Serges would reconstruct him, that he would receive his signature armament: the Z-Saber, an energy-bladed sword not unlike the one his former commander held.

It wouldn't be long before players could experience the weapon's might for themselves. In Mega Man X3, Zero became something of a part-time playable character, using both his Z-Buster and the Z-Saber in tandem, with the latter broken out as a devastating finishing blow following a pair of fully charged Buster shots (though, in truth, just a slash from the saber alone would be enough to finish most enemies). In various circumstances, Zero would pass the weapon to X to help his ally carry on the fight without him.

The favor would be returned many years later in Mega Man Zero, when the spirit of X would return the weapon to its original owner, allowing him to use it as the foundation for many new weapons — and continue on in the fight toward everlasting peace! **— DAVID**



CALIBURN

IS THERE ANYTHING cooler than a talking sword? Well, Sonic might be able to think of a few things — at least, before he and the sacred sword called Caliburn really got to know each other.

When King Arthur fell to corruption and became the evil Black Knight, it fell to the Blue Blur to team up with the enchanted blade to put an end to his tyrannical reign over the storybook world of Camelot. Though Caliburn thought Sonic was little more than a lowly knave, he would help the heroic hedgehog to overcome many trials and obstacles, thus earning the title of Sir Sonic, Knight of the Wind.

Over the course of their quest, it would come to be revealed that Caliburn was but one of four such sacred blades, which had at one time been the single legendary blade, Excalibur. Its scabbard had a corrupting effect on Arthur, which in turn affected Excalibur, ultimately separating it into the evil Deathcalibur and the four sacred swords: Arondight, Galatine, Laevatein and Caliburn.

When Caliburn itself was shattered by the power of the Dark Queen, Sonic's determination and the help of Nimue and the Knights of the Round Table saw him restored to his true form of Excalibur, its lost light transforming his wielder into Excalibur Sonic, allowing them to finally finish the fight once and for all! **— DAVID**

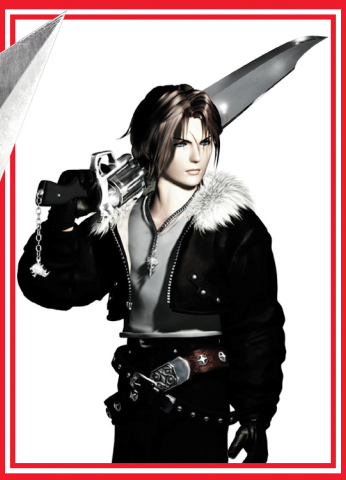
THE BUSTER SWORD

WHEN I THINK "gaming swords," the Buster Sword from Final Fantasy VII immediately comes to mind. Although Guts from the Berserk manga rocked the giant sword way before Cloud, it's hard to forget that image of the main Final Fantasy VII protagonist standing in front of the Shinra Building, sword at the ready.

Cloud's sword has a long history behind it that I won't spoil here (you never know!), but suffice it to say he has ownership of it at the start of Final Fantasy VII, and he knows how to use it. Not only does it perform a variety of functions for Cloud (in the form of latent abilities and Limit Breaks), but players can also slot Materia into it, which serves as a customizable magic and stat enhancement system. Square really added a ton of personality to it beyond its initial design.

Thanks to the Switch port that arrived in 2019, Nintendo loyalists were able to experience this truly iconic weapon's first appearance for the first time. The new remake, which has just arrived on PS4, adds more character for the Buster Sword into the mix by directly displaying slotted Materia on the sword while playing. Awesome!

Speaking of iconic Final Fantasy swords, there's another contender in the mix that came directly after, and is also wielded by a main character! Which brings us to . . . **— CHRIS**



THE GUNBLADE

THE IMPACT THAT the Gunblade had on me when playing Final Fantasy VIII for the first time was immediate: It was pretty much the coolest thing I had ever seen. Although VIII gets a lot of guff for its edgier focus and even broodier protagonist (what a feat!), Squall and his Gunblade are most definitely in the pantheon of Final Fantasy lore.

I mean, what more could you want? It's a gun *and* it's a blade. As usual, the team at Square managed to pack a ton of personality into this sword, as players are able to press a button to "trigger" a gunshot right at the moment of each melee impact when fighting. It was such a subtle little thing, but it worked at keeping me engaged, just as the interactive attack system did in Super Mario RPG before it.

Given its form factor, the Gunblade might also be the most popular replica I've seen in fan collections, from a pure anecdotal standpoint. It's a showpiece!

The Gunblade is so memorable that it even made an appearance in Final Fantasy XIV. Well, "an appearance" is an understatement, as the Gunblade idea itself became an entire class in the MMO with the Shadowbringers expansion. Yep, you can even cosplay as Squall with in-game items and live out your Final Fantasy VIII dreams. How's that for a legacy?! **— CHRIS**

THE SHOVEL BLADE

WHEN IS A blade not a blade? When it's a "spade!" (I'm not sure that's how the joke goes.)

The story behind Shovel Knight's inception is common knowledge by now: Yacht Club Games needed a gimmick for their freshman project, took a long look at Link's downward thrust in Zelda II, then decided to base an entire game around that mechanic. A brainstorm session or two later and, voilà, the Shovel Blade was forged! A versatile apparatus that can be used to unearth treasure, clear blocked passages, slice through the toughest armors and pogo-bounce off the noggins of Propeller Rats, the Shovel Blade is truly the weapon of champions!

Others aside from Shovel Knight have answered the call to Shovelry. Black Knight brandishes a more sinister variant of the Blue Burrower's tool, while Polar Knight carries a weaponized snow shovel befitting a warrior of his stature. Outside the game, this unorthodox non-sword continues to spread in popularity, inspiring developers to think even further outside the box when it comes to their protagonists' arsenals. What other landscaping instruments are likely to receive an edged upgrade in future titles? Dual-wielded garden forks? Barbed-wire rakes? High-powered watering wands with bayonets!? Don't even get me started on dibbers! **— TONY**

EXOR

THE IMPRACTICAL GIANT anime sword may be an all-too-common occurrence in the Japanese RPG sphere, but who could have guessed that a flippin' Mario character would be king of this trope!?

This living titan of steel is Exor, harbinger for the extradimensional Smithy Gang's invasion of the Mushroom Kingdom in Super Mario RPG. It's kinda difficult not to notice his literal sky-splitting contour on the cover of the box, on the title screen or in any of the game's numerous promotional materials. In fact, his sharp visage is so synonymous with the Square classic that many kids back in the day assumed he was the main villain! (The original TV commercial only added to the confusion by erroneously calling him "Smithy the Sword"!) Mistaken identity aside, Exor nonetheless played a key role in setting the tone for Mario's isometric adventure — his descent from space shattered the Star Road and scattered the seven Star Pieces across the land, and his violent occupation of Bowser's home turf raised the stakes beyond any our heroes had ever faced before.

But this is still a Mario game, which means everyone's got a personality quirk. Using Mallow's Psychopath ability to plumb Exor's thoughts, you discover he's a lonely soul who's blind in one eye and suffers astigmatism in the other! I guess being a massive immobile blade isn't all roses! **— TONY**

HONEDGE

FROM ONE LIVING blade, let's turn our attention to another. Except . . . is Honedge really alive? It is a Ghost-type, after all. So does that mean it used to be a living creature at some point in the past, and it's only now clinging to this plane of existence as a lingering specter of yesteryear? Ghosts in the Pokémon world are more than a little confusing.

Its second type, Steel, is easier to wrap your head around. Not that you'd want to do that! Honedge would give you a splitting headache, or worse! This spooky sword attacks its foes using its own body as a bladed weapon, slicing through enemies' defenses with ease. That Steel typing ensures its strength defensively too . . . or it would, if the Ghost type didn't mean that most physical hits phase right through it. It's like trying to punch the wind!

Honedge has become one of my personal favorite Pokémon both for that useful type combination and for its incredible design. It carries its own scabbard around to sheathe itself when it's not battling, but said scabbard is made with an eyehole so it can still see what's going on. It simply clones itself when it evolves, becoming the self-dual-wielding Doublade, who brings twice the pain. And then its final form, Aegislash, is one of the most noble and intimidating monsters ever made — it is a sword that carries its own shield! Incredible. **— LUCAS**

SWORD MAN

LET IT NEVER be said that Dr. Wily isn't resourceful! The mad scientist has carved a prodigious criminal career by using every part of the buffalo, from building one Robot Master out of a cypress trunk to Frankenstein-ing another out of scrap metal. His creations may not always be the prettiest on the block, but they get the job done!

Only Wily would steal a sword from a museum and decide that, instead of displaying it on his fireplace mantel, he ought to build an android *around* the sword itself. The fruit of Wily's labor is Sword Man, the lava temple guardian of Mega Man 8. Befitting such an honorable weapons specialist, his steel is as magnificent as it is comically oversized. No, seriously! That sword is so large that he would lose his balance if his body were constructed as a single unit! So to compensate, Wily segmented Sword Man's torso and legs and fitted them with antigravity stabilizers — which works, uh, somehow? I don't understand the science behind it all, but then again, I'm not a robotics engineer.

This wouldn't be the last time Wily incorporated a sword-themed Robot Master into one of his rosters of terror. Mega Man 10 introduced Blade Man, a repurposed tour guide with not one but *three* swords in place of his hands and head. (Wily may be resourceful, but subtle he ain't!) There never has been a Shield Man, though . . . . **— TONY**

LIGHTSABERS

ONE OF THE coolest sword designs in media is the lightsaber. This physically impossible sword has a hilt that emits plasma that inexplicably ends about three feet from the user. Supposedly, mechanics in the hilt contain the beam in a field that prevents it from just becoming a blaster. The "blade" is not hot, but it is so powerful that other matter melts around it, allowing lightsabers to cut through metals — and pretty much everything else — with ease. It also instantly cauterizes flesh wounds. Ouch!

Wielders of the lightsaber traditionally construct their own device that reflects the knowledge, training and respect for the device necessary to use it properly. In the original Star Wars trilogy, we only see traditional lightsabers used that have a single beam emanating from a single hilt. Later, we see double-bladed sabers, lightsaber pikes and all manner of other weapons. While the concept of kyber crystals has only entered the mainstream movies briefly, these crystals are said to be the power source of each lightsaber, and batteries keep the mechanics powered. These crystals also give the beam its distinctive color, and can be harvested naturally or synthetically created. The distinctive sound and look of the lightsaber makes it the most iconic item from the Star Wars universe, and nothing can beat a good lightsaber duel between good and evil! **— BRETT**

THE BEAM KATANA

UNLIKE MANY OF the mythical blades here, Travis Touchdown's trusty Beam Katana wasn't acquired through a majestic quest or some other act of heroism. Instead, he bought it online, which is just one of the ways the man's methods might mirror our own. His signature armament is clearly an off-brand lightsaber, looking more like something out of a cosplay contest than anything an actual Jedi Knight might wield, making it one of the more relatable laser swords in gaming. The uncivilized gestures necessary to recharge the thing are almost too human for words — Obi-Wan and Darth Vader wouldn't be caught dead waggling their weapons that way.

In fact, No More Heroes wouldn't exist if it weren't for the Wii and its popularization of motion-controlled gaming. By 2007, Twilight Princess, Red Steel, Dragon Quest Swords and many others proved that Wii games about swinging sharp things around were big business. No More Heroes both followed and bucked that trend, ditching full motion controls in favor of subtle tilt inputs mixed with traditional button presses. That's part of why the series is still going today, while competitors like MadWorld hit the skids long ago. Physically, it won't wear you out. Psychologically, it's both radical and ridiculous! **— JONATHAN**

ERDRICK'S SWORD

ONE OF THE reasons the original Dragon Quest (or Dragon Warrior) was so compelling was that you weren't the first hero to come along and save the world. Throughout the entire adventure, you walked in the footsteps of Erdrick, a legendary hero who'd gone before you in the past and purged the evil from the land long before you were even born. You come across hints of his epic exploits here and there, as you explore the cave that holds his final resting place, unearth his armor in a ruined city and, ultimately, find and claim his ancient sword moments before the final, climactic battle against the dreaded Dragonlord.

In that original 8-bit appearance, the limited technology of the time meant the power of Erdrick's Sword could only be communicated with a simple number: It offered +40 to your attack stat, making it the best weapon in the game. But its legend has grown greatly since that humble beginning, as it's reappeared in several subsequent sequels. In Dragon Quest III, the game in which Erdrick himself is the hero, the story of the sword being first forged is told. In the most recent sequel, Dragon Quest XI, an identical blade called the Sword of Light is wielded by the Luminary. And both the new and old versions made it into Smash through the Fighters Pass DLC giving us more than one Hero! **— LUCAS**

PARALLEL FALCHION

WHAT'S BETTER THAN one epic legendary sword? How about one epic legendary sword that travels back in time to meet up with itself in the past, so that two versions exist at the same point on the timeline?

Seven years post-launch, I think it's safe to go ahead and be open with spoilers from Fire Emblem Awakening, right? I mean, this is one of the worst-kept secrets in all of Nintendo fandom at this point, and especially so since Lucina joined Smash all the way back in 2014. (That was just *one* year post-launch! Her masquerade didn't last long.)

Anywho, for anyone still not up to speed, the beginning of Awakening involves Chrom, the prince of the Halidom of Ylisse, in a battle to save his sister from monsters that emerge from a portal in the sky. He's assisted by a mysterious masked ally who arrives through the same portal . . . but he's wary of this "ally" all the same, because the masked man seems to be wielding his exact same sword and using his exact same moves! After continued confusion that includes a clash of Chrom's Falchion essentially fighting against itself, the truth finally comes out: The masked man is no man at all, but rather Chrom's own daughter Lucina, from the future! She took up her father's sword when he fell in the past, and traveled back in time to prevent that tragedy! **— LUCAS**

KEYBLADES

IT IS SAID that only chosen individuals who are strong of heart can wield a Keyblade. Fortunately, those don't seem to be in short supply in the universe of Kingdom Hearts, which has seen two wars named for the mighty weapon!

Despite tending to feature no actual blade to speak of, Keyblades are nevertheless effective weapons when fighting against dark entities such as the Nobodies, the Unversed, the Dream Eaters and the Heartless. Ironically, the Heartless are also drawn to Keyblades, meaning wielders are prone to being attacked at almost any time.

The key theme goes beyond just looks, as attaching Keychains can enhance a Keyblade's stats, give it new abilities and even change its appearance. As such, Keyblade wielders don't tend to adopt new Keyblades often so much as alter the one they have. Many of these Keychains tend to be representative of the worlds from which they originate, and, as such, so are the forms that they'll change a Keyblade into.

Keyblades have various abilities, from extending for Ultimate Attacks to serving as modes of transportation when transformed into Keyblade Gliders. Their greatest power, however, is what their key-like forms represent: the ability to either open or seal the barriers between different worlds — to say nothing of any other locks they come across. **— DAVID**

GALAXIA

MUCH LIKE THE enigmatic swordsman who wields it, Meta Knight's legendary blade, Galaxia, is shrouded in mystery. Despite being a fixture of the series, the sword's origins are never explained within the games themselves — but the short-lived animated series, Kirby: Right Back at Ya!, revealed it was forged by a divine being known as Photron, who imbued it with mystical powers.

Fans got a brief taste of these in Meta Knightmare Ultra, an ancillary mode included in Kirby Super Star Ultra for DS. As its name implies, the mode put players in control of Meta Knight, who was on a journey to become the greatest warrior in the galaxy. As the masked swordsman defeated foes, his blade steadily gained power, allowing him to unleash special moves like his signature Mach Tornado (an attack that Smash Bros. players are all too familiar with).

But while Galaxia is most commonly associated with Meta Knight, Kirby has also wielded it on a handful of occasions. The sword grants the puffball the Master Copy Ability during his climactic confrontation with Dark Mind in Kirby & The Amazing Mirror. It's also one of the gigantic blades Kirby could conjure up with the Ultra Sword ability in Return to Dream Land, and he could even battle against the sword itself in Kirby Quest, a minigame featured in Kirby Mass Attack. **— KEVIN K.**

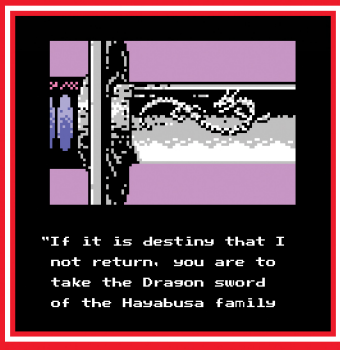
THE DRAGON SWORD

NO MATTER WHICH incarnation of Ninja Gaiden you're looking at — be it the arcade original, the NES classics, the modern Wii U and DS games or anything else in-between — you will always find Ryu Hayabusa, and he will always have the Dragon Sword with him.

The finer details of the Dragon Sword's origins change a bit between installments in the series, but whenever its mythology is discussed, two things are always true: It's an heirloom of the Hayabusa clan, and it was carved from the fang of an ancient dragon.

The Dragon Sword is a katana, and a very powerful one at that. In its basic form, It can cut through nearly every enemy you encounter with ease — but like any good video game sword, it can also be powered up. For example, in Ninja Gaiden II: The Dark Sword of Chaos, Ryu can cause the sword to glow with focused energy, giving him the power he needs to defeat the final boss. Or, in Ninja Gaiden 3: Razor's Edge, he can transform the blade into the "True Dragon Sword" by combining it with the Eye of the Dragon!

It's everything a ninja could ask for. It's got good reach, it looks awesome and it's easily one of the coolest katanas to ever grace a video game. (Does your family have an heirloom sword?) **— KRIS**



THE MASAMUNE

CHRONO TRIGGER FEATURES a variety of swords, but none are quite as legendary as the Masamune. Serving as a major plot point for the beloved character Frog, the Masamune carries with it an impressive history dating back to 12,000 B.C. It was originally crafted as the Ruby Knife, made from a prehistoric material called Dreamstone in order to destroy the dreaded Mammon Machine. Eventually it was forged into a full-blown broadsword and imbued with the spirits of magical creatures named Masa and Mune, who guarded it atop the Denadoro Mountains. In the Middle Ages, a knight named Cyrus claimed the blade, but it was broken in half in a battle with the evil wizard Magus.

Delving too much deeper into its past brings us into spoiler territory, but what makes the blade so special isn't just its history — it's what it means to Frog. When he finally wields the reforged blade, Frog begins to believe himself to be the knight his late brother always knew he could be. Yes, it has several unique attributes in battle, and it looks really cool, but as Masa and Mune tell anyone who tried to claim the Masamune for personal glory, "It's how you *use* the sword that's important, not who owns it." A sword that is as wise as it is powerful? That's no common thing. **— KRIS**

THE HIGH-FREQUENCY BLADE

LEAVE IT TO Metal Gear Solid to completely over-explain (in a good way) one of their most iconic pieces of tech outside of the actual, you know, Metal Gear units.

The high-frequency blade might not have the same ring to it as "Masamune," but it's very well known to pretty much every Metal Gear fan around the world. Wielded first by Gray Fox and eventually used by other members of the Metal Gear universe, the sword was used to set the tone for one of the most harrowing moments in any video game. Although Gray Fox was technically a part of the original pair of games (pre-Solid), when he jumped onto the scene as "Cyborg Ninja" he made his mark on gaming forever.

So what does this have to do with Nintendo? Well, Gray Fox was a central character in Metal Gear Solid: The Twin Snakes for the GameCube! The polarizing port was co-developed by Silicon Knights and Konami, and completely reimagined the PlayStation classic on a new platform. The remake introduced the series to a brand-new audience, and Gray Fox later expanded his own influence even further by leaping into the Smash Bros. series as an Assist Trophy. How many times has he carved you up with that killer blade? Be honest! **– CHRIS**

THE MONADO

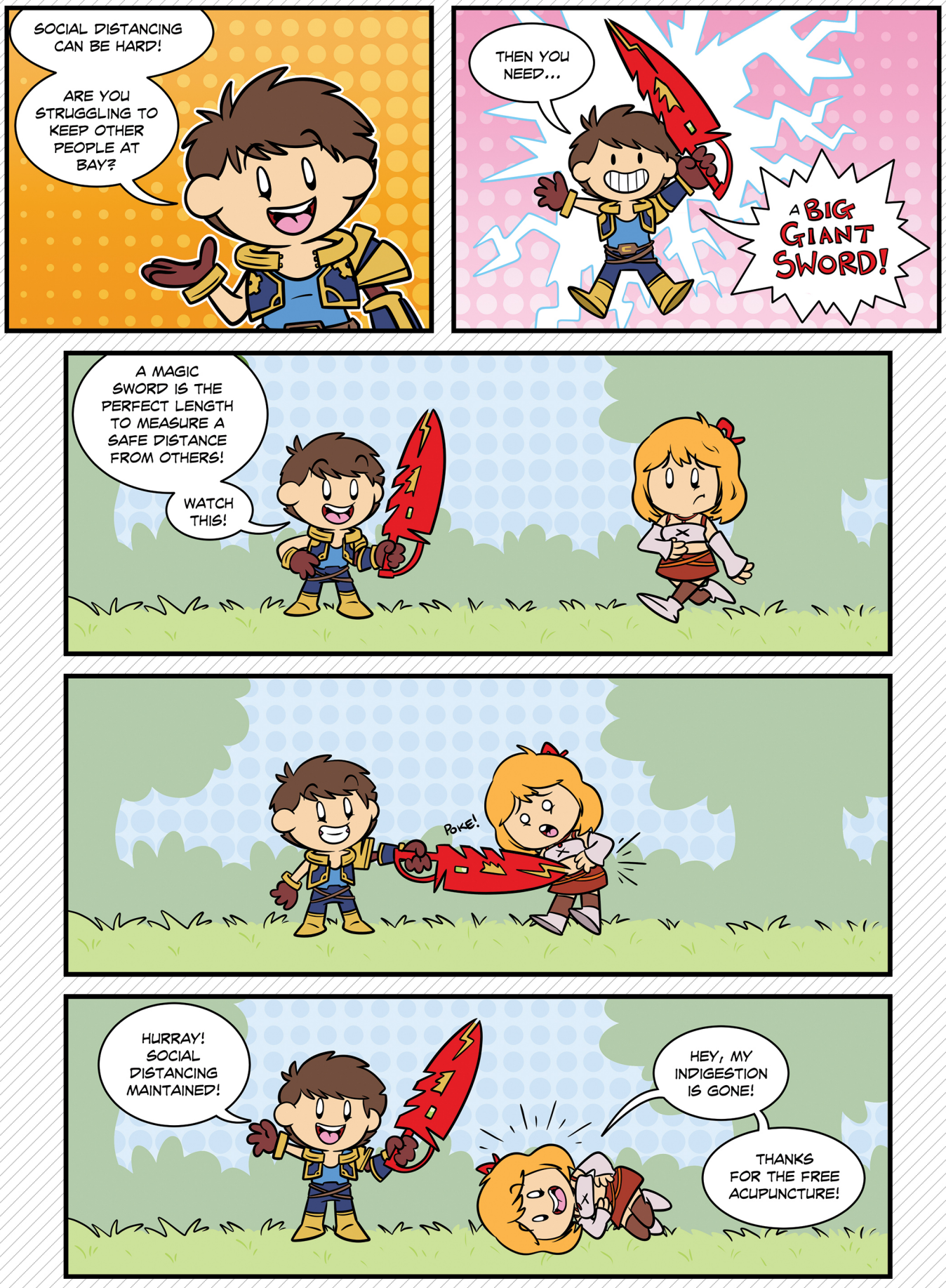
THE MYTHICAL BLADE at the heart of Xenoblade Chronicles and Shulk's signature weapon, the Monado is said to have been the same sword wielded by the Bionis in its titanic battle against the Mechonis. The blade is able to draw upon the ether around it and grant its wielder the power of foresight, allowing them to glimpse into the future and potentially alter its course.

These powers come at a cost, however. Like many other mythical swords, the Monado cannot be wielded by just anyone; only those who possess a strong will are capable of using the blade.

Shulk himself first lays hands on the Monado in a desperate bid to save Colony 9 from a Mechon attack, and he spends his ensuing adventure learning to unlock its secrets. As he slowly begins to master the Monado, he gains more powers, including the ability to speed up his movements. The Monado can also temporarily enchant other weapons, allowing them to damage typically impervious Mechon!

The many different abilities of the Monado even made it into Smash Bros., but altered to reflect the gameplay of that series – there it can temporarily enhance Shulk's jump height, damage output, defensive might and more. It's the most versatile sword of all! **– KEVIN K.**

Most of us will never swing a real sword. And even if we do, it almost certainly won't be in a real swordfight. That kind of combat was once common for mankind, but is now almost entirely the stuff of memory. Of fantasy. But not in video games! In video games the playing field is leveled, and everyone, regardless of actual physical ability, is able to become a true master of the blade. These 20 swords have helped generations of grateful gamers feel powerful. What will future games forge for us next?



BY MATTHEW LOFFHAGEN

XENOBLADE CHRONICLES: DEFINITIVE EDITION

An all-new encore of Nintendo's most epic adventure ever!

THE WORLD WAS an endless sea. Empty. Devoid of land and life from one horizon to the other. But, one day, eons ago, two titanic beings appeared in this midst of this nothingness.

They began to fight.

The battle of the Bionis and the Mechonis — one a creature of pure, natural biology and the other a metal, mechanical monstrosity — raged for years. Decades. Centuries, even — it's impossible to know how long. It raged until, at last, with one final blow by both, simultaneously, it ended.

Both titans died.

Still locked in the final fighting stance of that epic clash, the lifeless bodies of the Bionis and the Mechonis stood, frozen, for years. Decades. More than centuries, even, as they stood there for so long that the entire process of evolution took place on and around them — a whole world of life sprang into being. Plant life flourished. Animals came into existence, and, ultimately, sentient civilization. Whole races of people living out their lives on top of the body of a long-dead giant. In the midst of that still-endless sea, still devoid of any other land or life, life found a way to be born on the back of the Bionis.

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: MONOLITH SOFT
RELEASE: MAY 29, 2020 RATING: T

AN INCREDIBLE SETTING

This world — this idea that an entire world can exist on top of the dead body of an unfathomably enormous ancient creature — instantly captured my attention when Monado: Beginning of the World was first announced at E3 2009 over a decade ago. Or was that aspect of the game revealed at that point? It's hard to remember exactly, because the game that would ultimately be rechristened Xenoblade Chronicles was given very little spotlight in its first appearance back then, and then dismissed entirely by NOA after that. Now history is finally righting itself and NOA's righting their past wrongs by bringing us the all-new Xenoblade Chronicles: Definitive Edition, and my hope is that a huge new audience will discover for the first time what is one of my personal favorite games of all time. And I think the incredible setting should instantly capture anyone's attention!

Just look at those massive beasts pictured above! It's hard to get the proper sense of scale from just that image, but entire cities are built on just a fraction of the surface area of one of the Bionis' legs. The Bionis is the one on the right — the one on the left, the Mechonis, is the same robotic beast from this edition's front cover. Its colossal metal sword is so vast in scope that just its surface area serves as a miles-long explorable zone called Sword Valley in the game! The sheer enormity of this adventure is unparalleled even 11 years after this Wii swan song's reveal. It's Reason #1.

THE GRAPHICAL UPGRADE

Reason #2 why you should give the new Xenoblade Chronicles: Definitive Edition a try is that it's obviously going to look better than it ever has before. The original Wii edition was praised as a masterpiece by nearly every critic who penned a review of it, years ago, but those who did find some fault with it most commonly critiqued its visuals. The game was still gorgeous — there was no denying that — but it was also clear that it was pushing the Wii hardware to its absolute limits to achieve this breathtakingly large and often open world. The delays the game encountered on its path to finally getting released in North America didn't help matters — it compared less favorably to the competition in the States in 2012 than the alternatives in Japan in 2010, when it first released there.

Now, though, the hardware is up to the challenge of matching the game's original ambition. The same engine used to bring Xenoblade Chronicles 2 to life on the Switch has been sent back in time to brilliantly boost the look of its predecessor, and the results are clearly wonderful. I can't wait to see all the sights again in this style!

A SYMPHONIC EXPERIENCE

Expertly accompanying the revamped visuals will be a freshly re-recorded soundtrack — and this game's OST was already the stuff of legend on Wii. Really, they could have left the songs entirely untouched and the game could very rightly still have been called the Definitive Edition! But the developers went the extra mile and literally got the band back together, performing iconic classic compositions like "Gaur Plain" and "Engage the Enemy" once more to somehow make them even better than before. I'm not sure how! But I look forward to hearing each track once again.

If you're unfamiliar with the OST of Xenoblade Chronicles, I implore you to seek out recordings online, or visit the music player in Super Smash Bros. Ultimate for some samples. Or maybe don't! Just going into the Definitive Edition blind is perfectly appropriate as well. You can just look forward to being delighted!

TOP-NOTCH VOICE ACTING

It seems that one key audio element that may be staying exactly the same as before is the range of vocal performances first recorded for the Wii.

SOOTHSAYING SWORDSMAN

SHULK

When the peaceful Homs settlement of Colony 9 is viciously attacked by an invading force of relentless Mechon automatons, only the selfless Shulk can battle them back! Seemingly the only person who can safely wield the legendary Monado without suffering permanent harm from the strain it places on its user's body, Shulk is unexpectedly thrust into the role of savior of all the peoples of the Bionis. Thankfully, he's a natural leader, and soon an entire team rallies behind him, working together to repel the Mechon invasion! In battle, Shulk's swordsmanship with the Monado is the crux of combat, and he must balance its unique powers with his own personal abilities. Taken together, it's a wide array of skills that makes him well-rounded and well-suited to any situation — he can be a primary attacker; a healer; a wall. Whatever role is needed!

Again, I don't mind one bit if that turns out to be the case! Every actor in each role was and still is superb!

Nintendo's had such a weird roller-coaster relationship with voice acting. Star Fox 64 helped blaze the trail for the company over 20 years ago, but then several high-profile games since — especially in the Zelda series — have been more than happy to stay silent, telling their tales entirely in text. Xenoblade Chronicles swung the pendulum hard in the opposite direction, as this adventure is overflowing with voiced dialogue — hours upon hours of fully voiced cutscenes drive the narrative. In battle, the characters call out to and support one another.

That may be one of the few marks against the game in the long run, as hearing the same sound bites and cheeky quips over and over across dozens of hours of fights can get old. Maybe there will be a few new jokes tossed into the mix? For Reyn, at least? I wouldn't want the whole team to turn into a bunch of jokers . . .

IMMERSIVE COMBAT

Reason #5 Xenoblade is worth your while: the battle system! Unlike almost anything else Nintendo loyalists had experienced when the game was first revealed for Wii, comparisons at that time had to be drawn to games like the then-PlayStation-exclusive Final Fantasy XII. It's a complex system, so let's break it down.

Enemies appear in the open as you explore, and if you get close to them — or if they see you and chase you down — a battle begins. You control one hero, usually Shulk, with up to two other allies whose actions are directed by the game's A.I. Attacking happens automatically — if you simply move your character close enough to the enemy to keep their weapon in range, he or she will constantly strike the targeted foe over and over again, chipping away at its health little by little. That's just the very basic foundation that an entire tower of extra mechanics is built upon, though!

Successfully landing auto-attack blows charges up an array of extra skill options spread horizontally across the bottom of the screen, and it's the skillful use of these "Arts" that victory hinges upon. This is also where Shulk's signature sword and the centerpiece of the game, the Monado, comes into play. See, life didn't just evolve on the back of the Bionis over the eons — a race of metallic fiends also came into existence on the Mechonis. The Mechon attack . . . and the Monado is the only weapon that can harm them!

MEAT SHIELD
REYN

Oh, yeah! A whole new generation of fans is about to learn what time it is. *(Hint: It's Reyn Time!)* What you have here in Reyn, sports fans, is your basic burly best friend who's always ready to lead the charge. He dashes headfirst into the fray and pulls the attention of all enemies his way. He's the team's tank! Reyn's rippling muscles (and associated high HP total) soak up damage again and again, and he keeps on swingin'. What does he swing? Well, I don't really know what it is — it's an odd offensive/defensive combo weapon that looks like a beefy metal lance with a shield welded to the side of it. Oh, and it can also fire projectiles! It's a shield/gun/lance. Custom-made by his engineering-minded bestie Shulk, of course! With it, he's just as good at giving beatdowns as he is at taking them, and he's especially skilled at Toppling enemies once Shulk inflicts Break on them. A one-two punch!

KNIVES OUT
FIORA

Reyn probably claims the crown of Shulk's closest friend if there were to be a competition about it . . . but then there's a little something extra special about Fiora. OK, I mean it's obvious from the start, so we can just outright say that she's clearly Shulk's love interest as the story gets underway — sweetly supporting his work in the lab, making him food and reminding him to take breaks when he gets too wrapped up in things. But don't dismiss her as nothing but a sweetheart! She's got the fiery spirit of a fighter inside, as she fiercely defends her loved ones! In battle she dual-wields a pair of daggers with blistering speed, and her abilities reflect her skills with the blades — she can inflict the Bleed status on foes with her Lacerate move (causing them continuous damage over time) and she can hit several times consecutively in the same time the others take to land one blow. She's the fast one!

THE ONE-ARMED MAN
DUNBAN

Fiora may have gained her incomparable knife skills from all her time spent in the kitchen — cooking food not just for Shulk, but also for her big brother, Dunban! He's the original wielder of the Monado . . . but his body couldn't fully handle its power, so he ultimately lost the use of his right arm. No matter! He has another! This perfect paragon of chivalry never once complains about his partial paralysis, but charges into battle in support of Shulk while wielding a sword in his left hand instead. Ambidexterity must be in his nature, because he doesn't miss a step in the transition — in fact, his skills in battle are all built around the fact that he has so much finesse with a blade! He can draw aggro like Reyn, but unlike Reyn, he then focuses on dodging foes' attacks while they have their attention on him. Like a humble Zorro, laughing at his enemies as they try to hit him and fail over and over!

Luckily, Shulk has his Arts to access — after he's built up power from a few auto-attack blows, he can choose his ability of Monado Enchant to bless his allies' weapons with the power to actually pierce through Mechon armor as well. Teamwork like that is critical. For another example, some tough enemies are resistant to damage even when everyone's weapons are charged up by the Monado's power — those foes often need to be "broken," which means using an Art that inflicts the "Break" status. Then, following that, using another skill that inflicts the "Topple" status will cause the creature to temporarily lose its footing, crash to the ground and basically become defenseless, during which time the team can all rain blows down upon it to rack up damage quickly.

That's still just scratching the surface! Shulk's ability to see into the future, while commonly used in cut-scenes, also factors into gameplay in battle when he has a vision of a super-sized strike that's just about to hit him or one of his allies. A timer then pops up onto the screen to give you a few seconds to change the future by avoiding that incoming assault — or at least buff up your defense to be able to endure it when it's inevitably launched against you!

There's more. Positioning is key, as many foes take more damage when you attack them from behind or the side. More and more Monado Arts unlock the further you get into the story, each one adding another layer of complexity to the mix. You ultimately recruit seven different heroes, and building and balancing the best team of three from among that group is essential too!

But don't feel overwhelmed — the adventure of Xenoblade Chronicles is a long one, and the battles grow to be more involved slowly, over the course of dozens of hours. You always have plenty of time to master each new gameplay mechanic that gets introduced before the next new wrinkle comes along!

A CAST WORTH FIGHTING FOR

Anyone who's played any JRPGs in the past knows of a common shortcoming that brings the enjoyment of many of them down: poor party members. Strong casts of playable characters are almost always brought down by one or two goofball allies who are forced upon you. Odd ducks that you wish just hadn't even been dreamed up by the developers! Happily, the whole cast in Xenoblade Chronicles is excellent.

I've given each of the seven a separate introduction across the tops of these pages here, and you can't really go wrong with any combination of the three of them. In fact, I want to challenge myself while playing the Definitive Edition — I stuck with Shulk as my player-controlled lead hero for almost all of my previous runs, but this time around I'm going to attempt to let the A.I. drive his actions while I step into the shoes of the other allies. You can do that!

There's a ton of flexibility in how you handle these heroes, really, as each one of them has multiple Skill Trees you can choose between to grow their stats and abilities. You can swap out Arts you don't use much for others that might better match your personal playstyle. You can even alter their outfits, which visibly changes their appearance everywhere thereafter! That's where the infamous "Shirtless Shulk" comes from (see Page 55), and there's nothing funnier than reaching a really serious life-and-death story moment cutscene and having your characters go through their emotional dialogue in the middle of it while wearing nothing but their underwear.

OVERFLOWING WITH EXTRAS

Reason #7 Xenoblade is the best! All of

MEDICAL MUNITIONS
SHARLA

Armed with an imposing high-caliber rifle and blessed with a keen eye for accuracy, the sharpshooting Sharla is obviously the team's . . . uh, healer? Yes, in a case of curious incongruity, this warrior woman who presents as a sniper is instead mostly in charge of keeping the other fighters alive. Her most-used "attack" is called Heal Bullet, in which she fires a round of concentrated HP-restoring energy right into her allies' bodies. That's just the first of many different types of ammo she has access to, though, as her gun can also throw slugs that eliminate negative status conditions, buff her friends' defensive stats and, yes, even occasionally actually deal damage to enemies. Though her own ability to take down menacing Mechon is limited, Sharla is nonetheless invaluable in battle, particularly when she's making sure meathead aggro sponge Reyn is all patched up and able to keep doing his job.

MORALE OFFICER
RIKI

One of the most delightful party members you'll ever recruit in any RPG, Riki is the Legendary Heropon and the heart and soul of Shulk's squad. He keeps everyone smiling and lifts sullen spirits on the spot — and not just in story scenes. His jolly, cheerful attitude actually manifests in battle as buffs for his allies! Meanwhile, for his enemies, he's a master of messing with their flow. He has multiple abilities that inflict negative status effects on foes — he's even able to stack several on top of each other, such that you can have an enemy who's poisoned, bleeding and frozen all at the same time. Then, after crippling his opponents, Riki can use "Say Sorry" to remove all those effects and debuffs — and the more that are removed at once, the more damage Riki inflicts in one massive blow. He can also steal items, HP and even experience from baddies too . . . he's basically incredible. Go Riki go!

MAGICAL PRINCESS
MELIA

Finally, what's a good JRPG party without a princess in the mix? Melia is the final member of the team Shulk befriends, but the game might very well have saved the best for last — she's a seriously powerful spellcaster! The tradeoff is that the way she plays in battle is probably the most complicated out of all seven heroes, so there's a learning curve you'll have to overcome to master her moves. Basically, she doesn't just cast magic spells like mages in other games would — she first summons floating elemental spirits like Bolt, Flare and Aqua, and then she issues commands to those ethereal beings to activate effects in each fight. She can cause foes to fall asleep or lock down their abilities to use Arts against the party, for example, and dismissing the elementals she's already summoned is her primary way of dealing damage. It's tricky, but take the time to learn her ways!

the hundreds upon hundreds of extra little things to see and do. You can make a beeline straight through from one critical story scene to the next — and that's a perfectly valid way to play — but if you take the time to stop and smell the roses, you'll find copious amounts of sidequests, collectables and other ephemera that flesh out the world of the Bionis even further. You can build up the bonds of your characters through optional Heart-to-Heart story moments. You can find hidden treasures lurking around every corner. I mean, my goodness, you're even awarded extra XP just for exploring and finding unique locations! It rocks.

AN ALL-NEW EPILOGUE

Speaking of unique locations, there was one that we never got to explore in the original version: the Bionis' Shoulder. We spoke two issues ago about how it was an area originally planned to be included, but which got cut at some point seemingly fairly late in development. Now, though, the Shoulder has been fully completed and will be the focus of an all-new epilogue story called Xenoblade Chronicles: Future Connected! Taking place one year after the events of the main game, the new chapter reunites Shulk and Melia for an extra adventure involving exploring the Shoulder area, meeting up with the creatures that live there and dealing with what appears to be a rip in the fabric of space-time itself! Could the "Future Connected" name be a hint that the story Shulk and Melia will experience here will create a new, more direct link to the other games in the Xenoblade saga? We'll have to play it to find out!

This is a major addition that I honestly didn't expect — I thought, if anything, the Shoulder would simply be reintegrated back into the main game and nothing of any real consequence to the story would happen there, since that would mess up the existing narrative flow. But no! They're going for it! We get an all-new Shulk and Melia story, and I love that!

What's more, if you're a Xenoblade diehard who's already completed the main game before and you don't want to go back through all of it again in order to reach this new content . . . you won't have to! Future Connected will be selectable from the title screen right away when you first power on the Definitive Edition, so you can jump right into it directly. (I'm going to do my best to resist! I want to save it as a reward to encourage myself to fully complete the visually revamped main game from start to finish. Fingers crossed I can succeed!)

DIFFERENT WAYS TO BUY

I could keep going and list more, but hopefully with eight bold reasons to give Xenoblade a chance, I've got you convinced to do so at this point! All that remains is deciding how to buy. There are a few different options.

First up, the standard release goes on sale on May 29. It will of course be sold both physically or as an eShop download. For a game of this size, having it digitally may be enticing. It's an adventure you'll want to play bit by bit over a long span of weeks or even months, and not having to swap a cartridge out each time could be nice.

If you're a fan of physical media, though, you might want to consider the Definitive Works release. A limited special edition, it includes a 250-page hardcover art book that looks great. And there's a snazzy slip case too!

Meanwhile, a different version, the "Collector's Set," is on sale in the United Kingdom. It comes with the soundtrack . . . on vinyl! What a nifty collector's item (though I'm not sure how many people still have record players). Pretty cool, though!

However you decide to buy, though, I hope you do decide to — this is going to be the best version of one of the best game's Nintendo's ever given us. Everyone should play it! **— LUCAS**

BRAVELY DEFAULT II

Take your first step into the all-new adventure!

THE NEW DEMO of Bravely Default II is totally free, but that doesn't automatically make it worth downloading. There are plenty of titles on the Switch eShop that cost a dollar or less these days. In 2020, determining a game's worth has less to do with how much money you spend on it and more about how it spends your time. In this short adventure, which features a mission you won't find in the main game, every decision counts, making every victory feel earned and every minute well spent.

The original Bravely Default let you turn off random battles almost entirely, almost like it was trying to apologize for being a traditional turn-based RPG. If this demo is anything to go by, Bravely Default II will refuse to say sorry for the same thing. It literally throws you to the wolves as soon as you leave town and it doesn't stop until the very end. Also unlike in the original, fights are no longer randomly generated. Instead, they're initiated after colliding with monsters on the exploration screen. Weaker beasts may run when they see you coming, while tougher customers could charge you down on sight, leading you to head for the hills more often than not. This game is tough, and as someone who actually passed on the other Bravely Default games for being a touch too snoozy, that's very good news for me.

If you want to live, you can't sleep on training your party members on various skills. Like in the other Bravely games, assigning your character to different job types allows them to learn different abilities. There are five classes in this demo, split pretty evenly between different sorts of fighters and magic users. Their powers combined can transform you into a fighting force of extraordinary magnitude.

There's also a secret class that you only gain access to after beating the demo's first boss, should you get that far. His name is Bernard, and he's the toughest thief in town. By the time you find him, you'll probably be great at various jobs, but he'll kick you right in the booty anyway.

The only way to beat him is to make deft use of the series' signature "Brave" and "Default" techniques. Choosing to Default makes you block for a round in order to store active turns for later, while selecting Brave allows you to use those stored turns to take several actions at once. While it can be scary to pick Default — as it lets your enemies get a damage advantage on you early in a match — it almost always pays off. There's nothing quite like letting an enemy smack you in the face for three turns in a row, only to strike back with three of your most powerful spells in unison in an act of metaphysical revenge most righteous.

That just happens to be the best way to beat Bernard. Then, in true Mega Man style, you get his powers! Specifically, you unlock the Thief job class, which allows you to steal not only items and health from enemies but also their turns in battle, depriving them of their ability to even attack. It's required learning if you're ever going to beat the demo's secret boss, a giant tree beast named the Wood Golem, who is sure to beat all but the most thoughtful warriors to a pulp.

The fact that the game simply wouldn't let me win until I improved both my in-game job skills and my personal strategy at bravely defaulting made it more exciting and engaging than any RPG I've played in years. It also doesn't hurt that the visuals are fantastic, featuring highly detailed, beautifully animated, PIXAR-meets-Final Fantasy-style characters atop beautiful, painterly backdrops. And the music is sensational as well!

Try the free demo in the eShop for yourself — it's worth your time — and then don't snooze on the full Bravely Default II adventure when it's released later this year! **— JONATHAN**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPERS: TEAM ASANO & CLAYTECHWORKS RELEASE: TBA 2020
RATING: E10+

THE LEGEND OF HEROES: TRAILS OF COLD STEEL III

Already blazing a trail for its upcoming sequel.

IT'S BEST TO begin at the beginning. When picking up a new book or sitting down to binge a new TV series, you never jump straight to Chapter 12 or Season 4. You start where you're meant to. Chapter 1. Season 1. The beginning.

But video games are different. By virtue of long-running series oftentimes being spread across a wide array of hardware platforms and there frequently being spans of several years between sequels, it can be impractical to always pick up an ongoing saga at its original point of origin. This has been a worry of mine as we approach the launch of The Legend of Heroes: Trails of Cold Steel III on the Switch. I'm interested in the game, but I'm also afraid I might miss out on critical storyline context if I jump straight in here without playing the previous two Cold Steel titles.

Well, the creators say not to worry. In a recent interview with Nintendo Life, Toshiro Kondo, the president of Nihon Falcom, allayed those fears, saying, "In this game, Rean is now an instructor and his students are brand new, making for a fresh start. Furthermore, the relationships that Rean has forged until now also begin anew, so it's perfect timing for those who want to jump into Trails of Cold Steel from III. From the title screen, you are able to check character bios as well as things that have occurred up until this point. In this way, the player will be able to familiarize themselves quickly with the story."

That's reassuring to me, and my resolve to give Cold Steel III a try has been reaffirmed. What's more, it's recently been confirmed that Trails of Cold Steel IV is already in the works and will also come to the Switch, so playing this one first will set me up well to enjoy that subsequent chapter.

And if you don't care so much about story? All the better! You can just enjoy all the clashing swords — and the giant robots! **— LUCAS**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NIS AMERICA DEVELOPER: NIHON FALCOM RELEASE: JUNE 30, 2020 RATING: T

XCOM 2 COLLECTION

A true challenge for the most strategic minds.

HOW ABOUT ANOTHER worry? I'm not so much concerned about missing out on the story in this case, as I feel like plot is probably less of a focus in the XCOM series and "Aliens have invaded Earth. Fight back." is pretty easy to get up to speed with. No, my worry here is that my brain won't be able to keep up with the intensity of the necessary strategy!

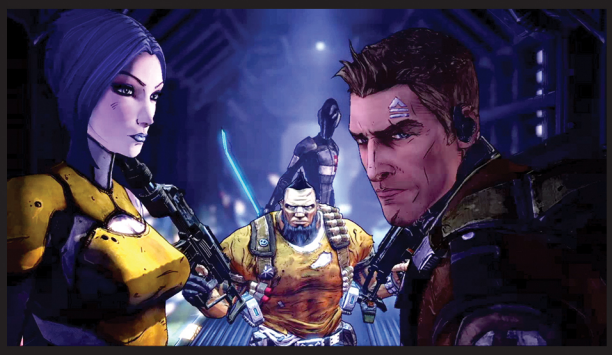
If you've played Mario + Rabbids Kingdom Battle, you've already gotten your feet wet in the realm of turn-based strategy on the Switch. This, however, is the opposite extreme. Where Ubisoft's Rabbids game was entry-level accessible, Firaxis' XCOM series is reserved for the truly elite. Where Mario's happy and colorful adventure through the Mushroom Kingdom was perfectly appropriate for eyes of all ages, XCOM's more violent imagery has earned it a T rating. It's definitely a step up — and I'm looking forward to challenging myself.

Even if I'm admittedly a little worried! I've never played an XCOM game before, and I've heard they can be brutal. You might get an alien enemy in your sights and have a 95% chance of scoring a hit — but that 5% chance of a miss will always seem to pop up at the worst possible moments. Worse still than any ill-timed lack of luck is the persistent threat of the ruthless enemy A.I. that will not hesistate to tear your squad of troops to shreds if given even the slightest chance to do so. You must move each unit with purpose and care . . . but also not too much caution, because you don't want to run out of time!

Supplementing the seriously strenuous soldier sequences is a whole side mode focused on base building, and that adds a whole 'nother layer of decision making into the mix. Hope you're ready to flex your mental muscles!

XCOM 2 Collection will include the base game, four DLC packs and the War of the Chosen expansion, all for $49.99. The only thing you shouldn't worry about is getting your money's worth! **— LUCAS**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: TAKE-TWO INTERACTIVE DEVELOPERS: FIRAXIS GAMES & VIRTUOS RELEASE: MAY 29, 2020 RATING: T



BORDERLANDS LEGENDARY COLLECTION

Shoot and loot!

THE HUNT IS ON! Gearbox's series of fast-paced, story-driven "role-playing shooters" are a perfect fit for the Switch. The first three Borderlands games will soon be released in various collections, promising hours of frenetic, hilarious adventure for fans of big guns and bad quips.

The world of Pandora is a lawless expanse of opportunity. Across three Borderlands games, you'll be able to battle against bandits, evil corporations and dangerously exotic wildlife, all while seeking out buried treasure. These are considered some of the best FPS games of the past decade, with both an addictive core gameplay loop and plenty of narrative meat.

You play as a Vault Hunter, fighting for survival and glory alongside a ragtag group of fellow pirates and scoundrels. In the first Borderlands game, it's your job to find a mythical treasure trove of alien loot, while in its sequels you're facing off against — or working for — an evil corporation.

The games are being offered in three configurations: the Borderlands Legendary Collection nets you Borderlands, Borderlands 2 and Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel. The Game of the Year Edition only contains the first Borderlands game, while the Handsome Collection provides Borderlands 2 and the Pre-Sequel.

It appears that all versions will release physically (barring any possible manufacturing shortages), but these are big, chunky games, so be prepared to save plenty of space on your Switch's memory card, as the games will require a large download even if you buy the Legendary Collection physically.

Whether you like character-driven storytelling or just blowing stuff up, there's something for everyone here! **— MATTHEW L.**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: TAKE-TWO INTERACTIVE DEVELOPER: TURN ME UP GAMES RELEASE: MAY 29, 2020 RATING: M

BIOSHOCK: THE COLLECTION

Hello, Daddy!

LIFE IS NOT always better down where it's wetter. BioShock: The Collection gives players two opportunities to explore the doomed underwater city of Rapture, plus one multiverse-spanning trip to a floating city for good measure.

If you've ever campaigned for keeping politics out of games, then BioShock might not be the series for you. The first two BioShocks are scathing critiques of Ayn Rand, proving how a civilization based on greed and a lack of regulations inevitably ends up leaky and broken. You explore the abandoned expanse of a nightmarish undersea city, trying to figure out what exactly went wrong, and why the remains of this civilization are crawling with terrifying monsters called Big Daddies.

It seems that there's only so much to be done with an oceanic civilization, so BioShock Infinite ditches the Rapture setting for a journey to Columbia, a steampunk floating city complete with its own Disney Princess, a mysterious interdimensional plot and plenty more social commentary.

BioShock: The Collection is available either as one big cartridge bundle or as individual purchases on the eShop. But bear in mind that the games are too big for a single cartridge, so if you buy them physically you'll still need to make room on your memory card for a massive supplementary download.

Also be aware that for all their complicated themes, these games are still violent, bloody shooters. They do their best to provide a meaningful political discussion . . . but they do so while wielding a chainsaw. I wonder what would Ayn Rand have said about that!
— MATTHEW L.

SWITCH PUBLISHER: TAKE-TWO INTERACTIVE DEVELOPER: VIRTUOS RELEASE: MAY 29, 2020 RATING: M

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: BREATH OF THE WILD 2

Exploring a few ways to adjust gameplay.

WHEN WILL WE stop getting our hopes up regarding Nintendo Direct rumors!? A particular Twitter leaker successfully predicted both the Indie World and Direct Mini in March, so when the same source said to keep our ears open for a Breath of the Wild 2 tease, of course we were ready to believe! The next likely opportunity for Zelda news is during the E3 Direct — or rather the Direct that would have aired during the now-canceled E3 2020 — but I can't wait that long! By Sahasrahla's beard, I wanna talk about Zelda now, so you're gonna listen!

This may come as a shock, but I consider the first Breath of the Wild to be merely alright. Oh, I bought it on Day 1, and yes, I invested dozens upon dozens of hours into Link's open-world Hyrule odyssey. I wholly understand why many consider it a masterpiece, and I marvel at the emergent gameplay possibilities that players continue to discover — but in the end, it never hooked me in the same way its predecessors did.

Regardless of your love for Breath of the Wild, you must agree that it's littered with potholes; by filling them for the sequel, hopefully Nintendo can win over those who weren't totally enamored before.

The biggest blemish is easily the weapon degradation system. Why would you ever feel compelled to equip your strongest armaments when even the mightiest are as brittle as glass? Other games are able to provide a massive selection of toys without rendering them to dust after a mere handful of swings. I say take a page from Monster Hunter and introduce whetstones to improve sharpness and durability once your chosen blade begins to dull. Maybe give players the option to fortify even the lowliest tree branch to become indestructible — why deny someone the joy of trouncing Ganon's latest heralds with a broom they found behind a stable? This process won't necessarily improve raw combat capabilities, but it could imbue unique effects to encourage experimentation.

Fortification is but one avenue to address the overabundance of materials that serve little purpose outside of cooking and potion brewing. Perhaps introduce a barter system to allow direct trades of produce and meat as an alternative to Rupee payments. And could we get some actual crafting up in here to transform assorted monster parts into weapons, shields or clothing? Let's lean even further into Animal Crossing territory and construct furniture for Link's home!

And we can't forget about the Shrines. The last game contained a whopping 120 of these mini dungeons, yet none past the four on the Great Plateau offered any substantial reward beyond weapons and armor likely already in your possession. Give us more Runes! Some might say it would fly against the "go anywhere and do anything" ethos if some high-end technique were squirreled away in a remote corner of the map. But if your reward for commandeering a rogue Divine Beast is a powerful Champion skill that grants further exploration or combat options, a handful of bonus abilities for the extra-adventurous wouldn't really break the game.

If Nintendo can mitigate Breath of the Wild's frustrations of combat and equipment management while also providing more tangible benefits for navigating the far reaches of the world, its sequel will raise the bar yet again! **— TONY**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: NINTENDO RELEASE: TBA
RATING: RP

SCREENSHOTS FROM THE ORIGINAL **BREATH OF THE WILD**

SAMURAI JACK: BATTLE THROUGH TIME

Jack is coming back!

GOTTA GET BACK. Back to the past. Because if you were born after the turn of the millennium, you probably aren't familiar with Samurai Jack at all!

To recap, Samurai Jack is a 2001 Cartoon Network series about a Japanese ronin who tries to drive the evil shapeshifter Aku from his homeland, only to be cast into the future and forced to seek a portal back to his original era — all while battling monsters, robots and bounty hunters. Hailed for its minimalism and environmental storytelling, the show gained a fervent following that persisted long after it went on hiatus in 2004. Creator Genndy Tartakovsky was eventually able to deliver a fifth season in 2017 that adopted a darker, more violent tone. Which brings us to the present . . .

As the first Samurai Jack video game since 2004's The Shadow of Aku, Battle Through Time greatly expands upon the series finale, which many viewers felt had been rushed through too quickly. Jack's divine katana is of course his weapon of choice, but he'll also have access to dozens of other weapons, including bows, hammers and even firearms. Many familiar allies will make a return appearance — such as the fan-favorite Scotsman — and all will be voiced by their original actors.

Battle Through Time is being worked on by Soleil Ltd., an offshoot of Devil's Third developer Valhalla Game Studios which previously delivered Naruto to Boruto: Shinobi Striker. We can tell that Naruto's speedy ninja action has greatly informed Jack's combat, and the show's trademark borderless art style is present in full force to realize Aku's twisted vision of tomorrow. We may be a little past Jack's prime, but I believe our time-traveling savior has one last fight in him! **— TONY**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: ADULT SWIM GAMES DEVELOPER: SOLEIL RELEASE: SUMMER 2020 RATING: T

SPONGEBOB SQUAREPANTS: BATTLE FOR BIKINI BOTTOM - REHYDRATED

Are ya ready, kids?

HE'S ALL GROWN up! Just last year, SpongeBob SquarePants — the hit animated series that serves as a flagship of the Nickelodeon brand — turned 20 years old. To celebrate, THQ Nordic announced a remake of one of the franchise's most popular past video game adaptations!

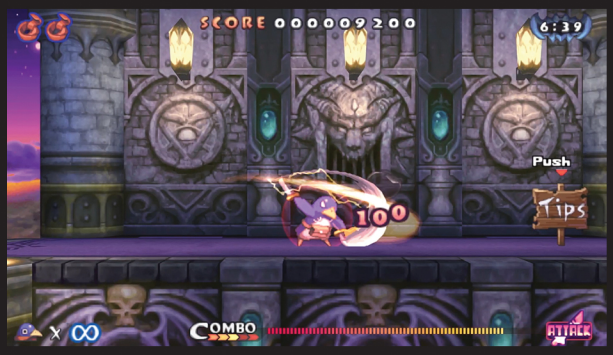
Originally released in 2003 for every major platform available at the time (including the GameCube and the Game Boy Advance, the latter receiving a unique version), SpongeBob SquarePants: Battle for Bikini Bottom received modest scores from critics at the time, but sold well enough to become a Player's Choice title. It gained a cult following over the years since, with speedrunners taking a shine to its "unique movement" and "fast pace." Fans cried out for a remake!

Those saltwater tears bore spiny tropical fruit (that doubles as a house under the sea) just prior to last year's E3, as it was announced that much like the original, Battle for Bikini Bottom — Rehydrated would be coming to every major platform available — including, of course, Nintendo Switch.

Developed by Purple Lamp Studios, Rehydrated promises "refined" gameplay, content from the original that wound up lining the cutting room floor and a new "Horde" multiplayer mode, in which two players step into the soggy shoes of SpongeBob, Patrick, Sandy, Squidward, Mr. Krabs or Plankton to fight waves of robots in various arenas, culminating in a battle against a robotic Squidward.

The game alone is priced at $29.99, but special Shiny and F.U.N. editions will be $149.99 and $299.99, respectively! **— DAVID**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: THQ NORDIC DEVELOPER: PURPLE LAMP STUDIOS RELEASE: (WHEN) I'M READY! RATING: E10+



PRINNY 1•2: EXPLODED AND RELOADED

You're the hero, dood!

I STILL REMEMBER exactly where I was when I beat Prinny: Can I Really Be the Hero? for the first time on my PSP. It was that powerful of a moment, because it took so much effort to get there! Now everyone can enjoy that same sweet sense of accomplishment, as it and its sequel — two widely ignored PSP gems — are due on Switch in the form of the "Exploded and Reloaded" double pack.

As the PSP has sunset and the 3DS and Vita have all but been buried, publishers are looking to get their mitts on pretty much any portable platform they can find, and they all have the Switch's number. NIS is resurrecting this oddball platformer spin-off series after a decade on ice (the sequel dropped in Japan in March 2010), as the gold rush on the Switch continues. The thing is, this is a sub-franchise worth bringing back!

Although Disgaea fans will get the most out of all of the little nuances and references, anyone can jump in completely blind. In Prinny you control the titular set of characters, all of whom are gunning to be the "hero" that finishes the game. The catch is that there are only 1,000 of them: That's your literal life count. Oh, and the game has a Demon's Souls-like world tendency system that makes levels harder or easier depending on how long you play. I told you this series was weird! It's only fitting for a Disgaea spin-off.

Although the sheer focus on difficulty will turn some people off, anyone who's remotely familiar with platformers should go in with an open mind. This absurd, wholly unique adventure is something we need more of right now. Even a straight port would be fine, but Exploded and Reloaded will sport enhanced visuals and DLC packed in. Even better, dood! **— CHRIS**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: NIS AMERICA RELEASE: FALL 2020 RATING: RP

CAPTAIN TSUBASA: RISE OF NEW CHAMPIONS

Unexpectedly, it's coming to America!

IT'S STRANGE TO think that there are still some popular Japanese game franchises that are completely unheard of in the West. Captain Tsubasa is a series that started all the way back on the NES, but which has only occasionally been localized in English.

Based on a popular manga and anime, the games tell the story of the 11-year-old title character, Tsubasa, who captains a soccer team on a quest to win the World Cup. Outside of Japan, old-school Nintendo fans might be familiar with Tecmo Cup Soccer Game, which was reworked during localization to remove all anime references (making it as generic and bland as possible). Finally, with the first new console release for around a decade, the series is getting a fair chance in the West.

Captain Tsubasa: Rise of New Champions takes advantage of modern hardware to look as much like the popular anime as possible. The game is filled with dynamic, explosive power moves that are reminiscent of Mario Strikers — hit the ball just right, and it can feel like stepping into a manga page.

Exciting as that may sound, it's clear why these games have never made a big splash outside of Japan. Localization probably feels like a risk in a very competitive market. Captain Tsubasa lacks the polish of FIFA or Pro Evolution Soccer; the smooth gameplay and animation that's only possible on a game with an astronomical budget. As such, it's difficult to know who this game will really appeal to. Fans of soccer games will likely be frustrated by how rough around the edges it feels. Meanwhile, all sports games are a hard sell to people who don't already love the sport in question.

If, though, you're a fan of both soccer and anime and willing to try something new, this could be just the game for you! **— MATTHEW L.**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: BANDAI NAMCO DEVELOPER: TAMSOFT RELEASE: TBA 2020 RATING: RP

CLUBHOUSE GAMES: 51 WORLDWIDE CLASSICS

Perfect for a whole bunch of family game nights!

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: NINTENDO RELEASE: JUNE 5, 2020 RATING: E

I WAS A huge fan of the sleeper hit Clubhouse Games on the DS. Looking at the library for the DS now, it doesn't have much chance of standing out, because a flood of similar titles tried to mimic its success. It was a simple premise: Take a ton of analog games that have been popular for decades — or even centuries — and compile them into an easy-to-access, quick-to-play video game on a single cart. The original had 42, and while many of those were card games, it also sported Bowling, Chess, Dominoes, Billiards and more. All but seven could be played with friends over Wi-Fi. Most were fun, a few were just silly, some didn't play great and others were just a distraction. Now, Nintendo's set to do it again, this time with 51 offerings.

On the Switch, Clubhouse Games will again utilize a touchscreen, but can also use button control. Several of the games will have multiplayer or even local wireless options, and the Big N's already showed us a menu housing 45 of the 51 games available for playing online. Players select three games to play, play them, and then they're shown the results. Naturally this opens up the question of whether there's some sort of leaderboard for each game, overall clout or accumulated points, or whether all that is removed and it's simply a way to play these games without all the clutter and bragging.

There are 13 card game offerings this time, as opposed to the 20 card-based games that the DS version had. Some are gambling-based, some are single-player, but most are played against an opponent. It remains to be seen whether or not different modes will be available, or if any options will need to be unlocked. In the original, you would have to play a game on Easy in Stamp Mode, get the stamp, and then it would unlock in Free Play Mode. There was also a Mission Mode where certain challenges could be met in specific games, like adding time limits or requiring a certain amount of points. It was a nice way of encouraging players to try all the games.

There are several "Toy" games where the playing field is made to look like an adapted Foosball table where Tennis, Soccer (in different alignments than Foosball), Curling, Boxing and even Baseball are played. Other games are more realistic and set outside, like Golf and Fishing. A matching game called 6-Ball Puzzle looks like a casual phone game and an odd addition in a more traditional game compilation, but it looks like they added some stuff from the old Wii Play games like Shooting Gallery, Billiards, Air Hockey and Tanks as well. (Tanks!!!!)

Then there are the board games like Backgammon, Mancala, Checkers, Chinese Checkers, Renegade, Chess, Gomoku, Shogi and more. There are also tabletop games like Four-in-a-Row, Sliding Puzzle and Slot Cars. Some of these I imagine will get a lot of play, while others may only be played once or twice, which is normal for any compilation.

Many of the games adapted from card, board and tabletop sources that are traditionally played on, well, a tabletop, will be playable that way here as well, as you'll simply lay your Switch flat and tap the touchscreen.

The game of games is set to arrive on June 5, and I for one can't wait to challenge my family without having to drag out various boxes — and I'll never lose a piece! **— BRETT**

THE WONDERFUL 101: REMASTERED

Shining like new!

WHEN I FIRST met Hideki Kamiya in 2013, he was tough, cool and maybe a little annoyed. In other words, he was a lot like Wonder Blue, the swashbuckling, sword-wielding anti-hero from The Wonderful 101! To be frank, I didn't think he'd want to be interviewed by me again, so when I got the news that I was scheduled to talk to him at PAX East 2020, I expected the worst. Boy was I wrong! This time around, Kamiya-san was just like Wonder Red: warm, enthusiastic and ready to keep our exchange going long after I thought it would end. I may still be blocked by him on Twitter, but in real life, we're on the best of terms.

Having re-established our rapport, I asked Kamiya-san if The Wonderful 101 was his Pikmin. If you're wondering why I started there, here's a little history for context. About 20 years ago, Shigeru Miyamoto, the father of Mario, moved from managing 10-20 people at a time to overseeing teams of over 100. The Pikmin series is a reflection of that move, casting players as commander Olimar as he simultaneously protects and endangers his crew of alien carrot workers. This struggle mirrors Miyamoto's life as an executive, and despite being an action game, The Wonderful 101 seems to do the same. Both games task you to track a cohesive team of up to 100 characters at once, each with their own color-coded abilities — and that's just one of their many similarities.

So does The Wonderful 101 symbolize Kamiya-san's experiences as a boss, just as Pikmin might for Miyamoto-san? He chuckled at the comparison, telling us, "That's an interesting take on what the Pikmin series is all about, but for me and The Wonderful 101, it's not like that at all. My first concept of the game was a big crossover with familiar Nintendo characters. You might be able to guess who Wonder Red, who can uppercut and throw fireballs, and Wonder Blue, whose sword attack is great for cutting grass, were originally based on. That idea didn't work out, so I adapted the premise to be about the kind of Sentai superheroes that I loved growing up. So these characters are less an expression of who I am, and more of an expression of who I want to be. They are cool saviors, traveling the world, each with their own larger-than-life powers and personalities. Though I guess Wonder-Director (Kamiya's self-insert cameo in the game) and I have a few things in common (chuckles again)."

I also wanted to know how this remastered version of The Wonderful 101 will compare to the Wii U original. Kamiya-san told us that while the graphics are improved, what he really wanted to do is "remaster the user experience, making the screen easier to read and give players a more comfortable time both controlling the game and figuring out what to do in it." While fans of the Wii U version like myself may miss the touchscreen controls, Kamiya-san says that they "actually weren't a part of the original design" and that this remastered version "comes closer to what his original vision for The Wonderful 101 was in the first place."

There was also The Wonderful 101's connection to Project G.G., Platinum's newly announced self-published title, to dig into. Everything we know about it so far comes from a short trailer featuring a dog, a giant monster and an equally titanic hero. About halfway through the video, text flies onto the screen that promises that Project G.G. will be "The powerful climax of Hideki Kamiya's superhero trilogy." So will the gameplay be like past games in Kamiya's gameography? He told us, "If Viewtiful Joe was my tribute to transforming heroes like Kamen Rider and The Wonderful 101 was my take on hero teams like those seen in Kyōryū Sentai Zyuranger (also known as the Mighty Morphin Power Rangers), then Project G.G. is my tribute to giants like Godzilla and Ultraman. Joe transforms. The Wonderful 101 unite. Project G.G. grows." And that's all he'd tell us!

Also shrouded in mystery is the new content planned for The Wonderful 101: Remastered. The game's Kickstarter campaign pulled in over $2,230,000 in funds, allowing Platinum to produce a two-part, 2D action spin-off campaign starring Luka, the youngest member of the team. I asked Kamiya what we might expect from this new adventure, and how it might relate to Luka's infamous middle and last names, which are "Alan" and "Smithee." (In case you didn't know, Alan Smithee is a pseudonym that's been used for years by people in Hollywood when they're ashamed to be a part of a movie or TV show.) Kamiya told us, "I cannot reveal the real middle or last name of Luka, and thus I chose Alan and Smithee for now, but I look forward to everyone checking out his new adventure." So is Luka hiding his real name, or is there something more sinister afoot? Hopefully we'll find out when the remaster is released this May! — **JONATHAN**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: PLATINUMGAMES RELEASE: MAY 19, 2020 RATING: T

TAKING THE WOODEN SWORD

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA
NES, 1987

It's become, inarguably, one of the most iconic images in video game history: the very first interaction in The Legend of Zelda, when Link steps into a cave, discovers an old man waiting there and claims ownership of the Zelda series' first-ever sword. "It's dangerous to go alone! Take this." That quote has grown to be so popular in the past three decades – referenced and spoofed so often in so many other games that have followed – that its original impact might feel a bit diminished in your mind at this point. Don't let it. It's still an incredible call to adventure – a mythical heroic moment that set up not just that first Zelda game, but the awakening of the warrior's heart that has fueled the entire franchise since. Not bad for a simple wooden sword, huh? For all the versions of the Master Sword that have come along since and every other tool and extra weapon Link has wielded as well, nothing has ever topped the emotional power of that original sword – the blade that ensured our first journey across Hyrule would not be undertaken alone. **– LUCAS**

LEFT IN THE PAST
WIZARDS & WARRIORS

It's been nearly 30 years since Kuros last wielded the IronSword!

BY 1991, THE valiant knight Kuros was well on his way to becoming a household name. Following the success of his original NES outing Wizards & Warriors, Kuros went on to star in a high-quality NES sequel with superstar model Fabio gracing the box art, a pair of LCD handheld games, a Worlds of Power novelization, a Game Boy spin-off game, an animated series co-starring Bigfoot the Monster Truck . . . and he even had an incredibly ambitious third NES game on the way! With all of this under his belt, it's strange to think that there are entire generations of gamers who have never even heard of Wizards & Warriors before. But with no new games, remakes, rereleases or even cameos since 1992, Kuros' career as a gaming icon was cut tragically short.

Back in 1987, British developer Rare created Wizards & Warriors for Acclaim, and it hit the Nintendo Entertainment System with a bang. Both the Nintendo Fun Club Newsletter and Nintendo Power pumped up the game as one of the next big things, and they weren't wrong – Wizards & Warriors did a lot of stuff players weren't used to. Stages were gigantic sprawling forests and caves that scrolled in all four directions at once, ready for you to explore. Where most games in 1987 were strictly tied to scrolling either vertically or horizontally, exploring areas like this was a relatively novel thing at the time.

WIZARDS & WARRIORS (1987)

IRONSWORD: WIZARDS & WARRIORS II (1989)

In the game, you play as Kuros, who on the box art looks like a Conan the Barbarian-type, wielding a massive sword, slaying beasts and generally being awesome. This look was repeated on the boxes for all sequels and spin-offs, as well as his appearance in the animated series Video Power. However, that version of Kuros never appeared in the games. In actuality, Kuros was a knight in shining armor who had the remarkable ability to jump even higher than Mario! It was this mechanic that the games were all based around, with combat taking a very distant back seat. It was there . . . but it wasn't something the game focused on. Kuros' proficiency with a sword left a lot to be desired, meaning that in order to defeat the waves of merciless enemies the games threw at you, you needed to learn new skills.

In the first game, those came in the form of things like throwing daggers, axes and special boots that let you kick open treasure chests. In IronSword, Kuros gained the use of a multitude of offensive spells. In Wizards & Warriors III, he joined various guilds which granted him abilities like shooting fireballs and becoming invincible.

All of this was in service of bringing peace to the land of Elrond – saving it from the clutches of the evil wizard Malkil. There were princesses to rescue, mystical mountains to climb, fantastic treasures to discover and, most importantly, countless hours of fun to be had.

These games were also fairly technically impressive for their time. The original's multi-directional scrolling was accompanied by some very memorable visuals and a stellar soundtrack from Rare's David Wise (Donkey Kong Country series, Battletoads, etc). IronSword, in 1989, featured jaw-dropping, screen-filling bosses and monsters with stunning animations; 1990's Wizards & Warriors X featured large, easy-to-see sprites which were a hot commodity back in the original Game Boy days; and Wizards & Warriors III's massive, interconnected world, in 1992, was right on par with greats like Metroid and Blaster Master in terms of level design.

In short, the Wizards & Warriors franchise had it all. Had it managed to survive into the 16-bit era, there's no doubt we'd still be finding new and exciting ways to defeat Malkil to this day.

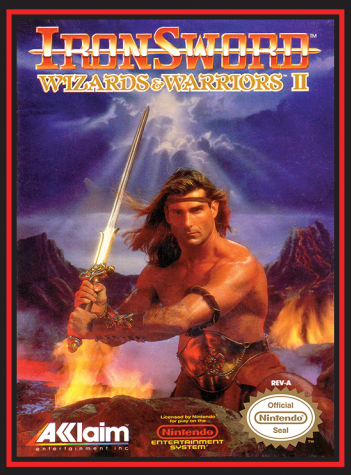
So what happened? Nobody really knows for sure. Wizards & Warriors III was intended to be followed up by a futuristic sequel called LaserSword, but nothing ever materialized. While Rare still owns the copyright to the original games, the brand itself is currently owned by a company called Throwback Entertainment, who has yet to actually do anything with it. Will we ever see the valiant return of Kuros? Will the cliff-hanger ending of Wizards & Warriors III ever be resolved? The world may never know. **– KRIS**

WIZARDS & WARRIORS

The first game charges you with rescuing a bunch of princesses, defeating monsters, collecting jewels and amassing new abilities, potions and items along the way. The levels are mostly contained to different kinds of caves, but whether you're avoiding lava pits in the depths of the Earth or jumping on branches to scale giant trees, Wizards & Warriors never feels bland.

With Kuros' swordplay registering as meager at best, other methods of attack like a throwing dagger, battle axe or even some creativity using the potion of levitation – combined with a frankly impressive vertical leap from a man in a full suit of armor – are what keep you alive. That, and the game's infinite continues.

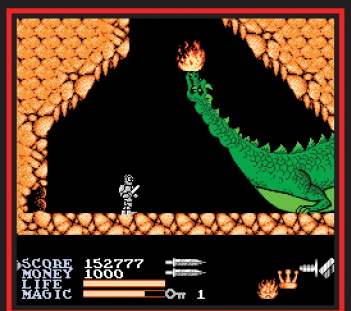
It's tough, but it offers very little in the way of punishment for death, so it balances out. It isn't perfect, but it's a great start.



IRONSWORD: WIZARDS & WARRIORS II

Rare farmed out development this time to Zippo Games, and considering its quality, it's unsurprising that they eventually acquired the studio. IronSword is a gorgeous game. From strikingly well-animated creatures to larger-than-life boss battles and another killer D. Wise soundtrack, IronSword still stands out today.

It's also equally successful as an evolution of the gameplay introduced in Wizards & Warriors. Platforming is still the primary focus, but the places you're jumping around in feel much more complex and diverse. You bounce up in the clouds, swim through an underwater maze and, once you assemble the parts of the legendary IronSword, climb Icefire Mountain for an epic final showdown with Malkil's new elemental forms. It's got some rough edges, but it's still some of the best action the NES has to offer.



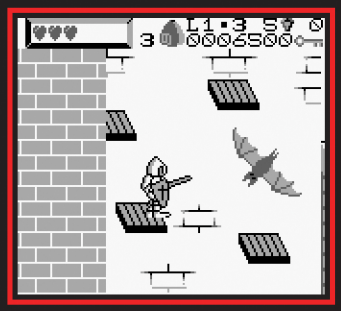
WIZARDS & WARRIORS X: FORTRESS OF FEAR

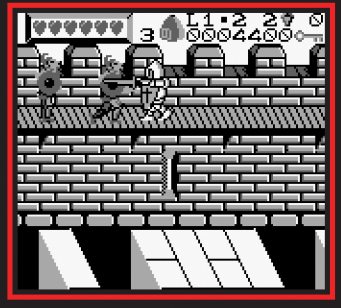
Some franchises took to the Game Boy with grace . . . Wizards & Warriors did not. This isn't a bad game, but it's certainly far less remarkable than its NES counterparts. Development this time went back to Rare, but in the transition to the small screen, Fortress of Fear lost touch with what made Wizards & Warriors special. Gone are the giant explorable stages, and in their place are linear, sidescrolling obstacle courses.

Kuros can still jump hilariously high, but as in a lot of Game Boy games, the physics just don't feel the same, resulting in a considerably less fun experience. Still, the visuals are well-defined, and the music, while a bit different from the other games in the franchise, remains memorable.

Oddly enough, for all its faults, Wizards & Warriors X probably has the best combat in the series. That's not to say that it's actually "good," but it's far more manageable. That has to count for something, right?

Oh, and that "X" in the name caused a lot of timeline confusion! (We still don't know why it's there.)

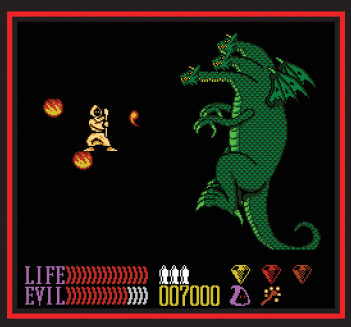




WIZARDS & WARRIORS III: KUROS - VISIONS OF POWER

This (sadly) final installment in the series takes place directly after the ending of IronSword, where the spirit of Malkil managed to escape Icefire Mountain. Kuros sets out to stop him, but now he has to do so not just as a knight, but as a thief and a wizard as well, each with their own sets of skills. Thieves can break into houses, wizards can cast spells and knights, well, still just hack and slash baddies to bits. It's also the most difficult in the series, since you have exactly three lives and no continues.

If you do manage to complete the game, Kuros inexplicably gets sucked into a time portal. After a hysterically long time travel sequence, some text appears about how peace has been restored — but it makes absolutely no mention of the complete insanity you just witnessed. It truly has to be seen to be believed.



CHARACTER PROFILE

SHULK

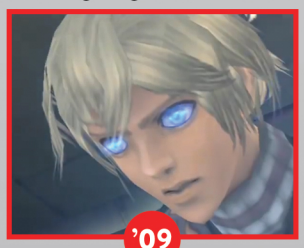
Let's look back at the past of the boy who can see the future.

FIRST APPEARANCE
XENOBLADE CHRONICLES (2012)

CAREER HIGHS

CAREER LOWS

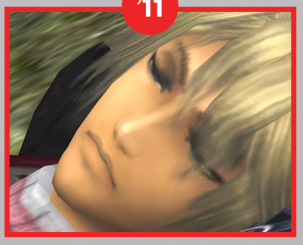
'09 — Shulk is introduced at E3 2009, the hero of an all-new IP called Monado: Beginning of the World!



'11 — But, two years later, Nintendo of America refuses to show the finished game at E3 2011.

'12 — Shulk finally sets foot on American soil the following April after an outcry forces NOA's hand!

'11 — The game launches in English two months later . . . but only in Europe. North American fans are ignored.



'14 — Just two years later, he parlays his success into an invite to the biggest gaming crossover of all: Smash!

'17 — But his star power doesn't land him further roles in his own series. New heroes replace him in each sequel.

'20 — Now his rise to fame is getting a restart, and one with a firmer foundation! No longer relegated to a niche JRPG that just barely hit a console at the tail end of its life, he's arriving on the Switch in its prime!

What's more, Shulk's story is finally officially continuing with the extra epilogue adventure included in Xenoblade Chronicles: Definitive Edition. Shulk is back, everybody!

HIGHLIGHTS

XENOBLADE CHRONICLES
Wii, 2012

Shulk is an immediately engaging protagonist just for being entirely unlike most other video game heroes: He's a bookish engineering nerd who gets excited about finding cool pieces of scrap metal to work with and who's spent his youth studying the dormant Monado in a lab. But from those humble beginnings, an epic hero's journey unfolds! It's one you must experience!

SUPER SMASH BROS. FOR Wii U
Wii U, 2014

I was personally shocked when his Smash reveal trailer debuted online — and on my birthday, no less! What a gift it was to not only have Shulk become a playable fighter, but also to have the entirety of Xenoblade recognized as being worthy to stand alongside the greats like Mario, Link and the Duck Hunt Dog. Gameplay-wise, he was presented perfectly!

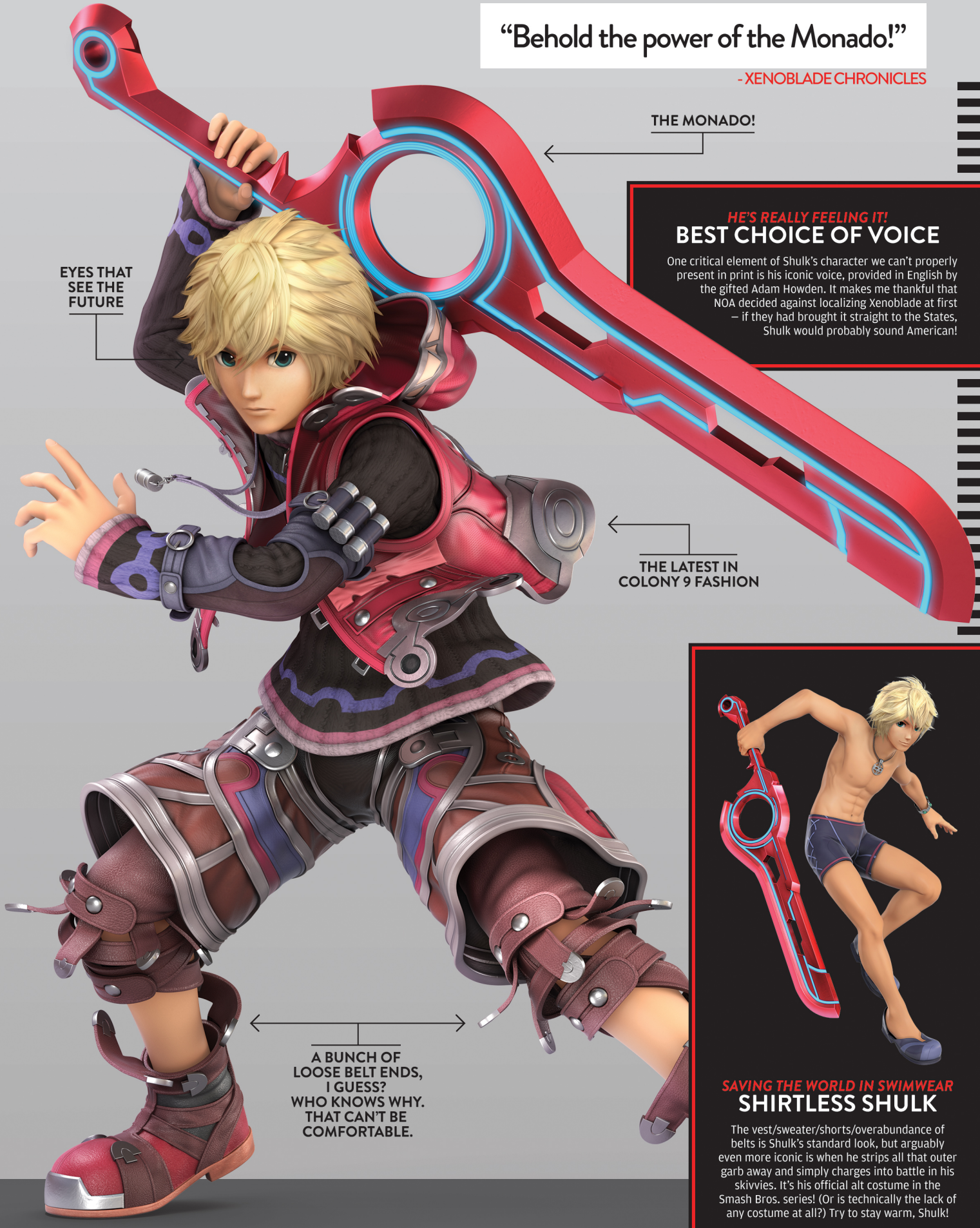
XENOBLADE CHRONICLES: DEFINITIVE EDITION
SWITCH, 2020

I'm thrilled that so many new players will get to step into Shulk's shoes for a visually revamped version of his original adventure, and I'm excited to see where the epilogue content takes him, after all he went through in the original quest! There's no doubt that the Definitive Edition will deliver the definitive Shulk, and I'm ready!

BY LUCAS M. THOMAS

"Behold the power of the Monado!"

- XENOBLADE CHRONICLES



HE'S REALLY FEELING IT!

BEST CHOICE OF VOICE

One critical element of Shulk's character we can't properly present in print is his iconic voice, provided in English by the gifted Adam Howden. It makes me thankful that NOA decided against localizing Xenoblade at first – if they had brought it straight to the States, Shulk would probably sound American!

SAVING THE WORLD IN SWIMWEAR

SHIRTLESS SHULK

The vest/sweater/shorts/overabundance of belts is Shulk's standard look, but arguably even more iconic is when he strips all that outer garb away and simply charges into battle in his skivvies. It's his official alt costume in the Smash Bros. series! (Or is technically the lack of any costume at all?) Try to stay warm, Shulk!

WARP ZONE

What Nintendo Power was writing about way back when.

THE MAY 1995 issue of Nintendo Power kicked off with a bit of Popstar power as Kirby's Dream Land 2 took the cover — and shared poster duties with Secret of Evermore. The Game Boy goliath was joined by a Take 2 look at PGA European Tour, and a two-page spread introduced the Play It Loud! line of colored Game Boy hardware.

Fighting games were the order of the day for this issue, with a triple threat of Justice League Task Force, Mortal Kombat 3 and Fatal Fury Special. Then we went to the theater with a trio of movie-based tie-ins: True Lies, The Flintstones and Warlock, plus Porky Pig's Haunted Holiday for good measure.

Epic Center brought news of Dragon Quest VI, reviews of King Arthur and the Knights of Justice and Brandish and strategies for Breath of Fire. The Nintendo Power Awards winners for 1994 were announced, with Donkey Kong stealing the show with Donkey Kong ('94) and Donkey Kong Country, the latter being declared the "Best Over-All" for any Nintendo system. The second place winner, Final Fantasy III, also took home a lot of awards, and Super Metroid claimed third place.

The Power Charts closely reflected the Awards, with Donkey Kong Country and Final Fantasy III taking the top spots, but Super Metroid was bested for third by The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past. Link's Awakening took the top Game Boy honor, while Final Fantasy III earned top honors for the Top 10 Epics. Killer Instinct for the Nintendo Ultra 64 was the Most Wanted, and F-Zero and Pilotwings got to take their Hall of Fame bows.

Nintendo Power embraced the Internet with a four-page look at the XBAND modem and its own "area" of America Online, with a four-page overview of that (plus a handy guide to online abbreviations). Another way Power Players could get "on line" was to enter this issue's Player's Poll, with a grand prize of a trip to the 25th Annual Bass Masters Classic Fishing Tournament. (It's the reel deal!)

Finally, Pak Watch closed things out with a look at the upcoming DOOM, Swat Kats and Castlevania: Dracula X for Super NES, and Earthworm Jim for Game Boy.

Fitting the theme of this issue of Nintendo Force, the June 1995 cover of Nintendo Power featured WeaponLord, a weapons-based fighting game. Preceding it was an Epic Extra look at EarthBound, and those were joined by Star Trek: Deep Space Nine, which shared poster duties with Primal Rage. Epic Center proper looked at "a new standard for RPGs" in Chrono Trigger, reviewed Rise of Phoenix and provided strategies for Illusion of Gaia.

Killer Instinct was revealed to be coming to the Super NES, complete with Killer Cuts soundtrack. Electro Brain's Dirt Trax FX used the power of the Super FX2 chip to bring motorcycling into 3D, the Life Fitness Entertainment System combined Super NES playing with exercise biking and Super Turrican 2, Prehistorik Man and Izzy's Quest for the Olympic Rings were here, too. This month's lone Game Boy title? Jungle Strike.

The Power Charts this month largely mirrored the previous issue's, but with Tetris taking the top spot for Puzzles, and Battletoads and Mega Man 6 getting the nod for the Hall of Fame. And remember XBAND? Player's Poll winners this month got some modems for themselves and their friends.

The issue closed out with a look at the Nintendo Ultra 64 (Chipset: Complete. Console: Complete. Release Date: April 1996. Um, about that last part . . .), and Judge Dredd headed up Pak Watch, which also revealed Nintendo had purchased 25 percent of Rare. They must have had a golden eye for investment opportunities! — **DAVID**

Nintendo Ultra 64 Unveiled!

The chipset is completed and the console is finished. All that remains to be done is to create a launch library of software, and that's in the works at Nintendo and the other exclusive Dream Team companies. The official release date for the NU 64 in North America has been set for April 1996. Programmers will use the few extra months of development time to discover more of the wonders of the NU 64 hardware and incorporate them in their games. Like a wise man once said, he who waits patiently reaps the harvest of the most awesome, mind-blowing video game hardware on the planet.

CHIPSET · COMPLETE
CONSOLE · COMPLETE
RELEASE DATE · APRIL 1996

The wraps are off on the ultimate high-end video game system—the Nintendo Ultra 64. You are looking at the first published photos of this 64-bit beauty. Talk about sleek. This baby is a Porsche, from the subtle curves to the four controller ports. As you can see, the Game Paks connect through the slot on top of the unit as in the Super NES and the charcoal finish looks as sophisticated as the Silicon Graphics, Inc. technology hidden inside. It's the perfect balance of power and beauty which, incidentally, is what the Nintendo Ultra 64 will deliver more than any other game system.

Tom Jermoluk, president and CEO of Silicon Graphics Inc.: "From the start, Silicon Graphics has had a vision of what we could do if we dedicated the power of our technology and our experience creating computer graphics solely to the purpose of making video games. With the graphics and audio generated by the final chipset, I'd say that even we're amazed. Now this breakthrough 3D graphics technology needs to be translated into video games which take full advantage of the power of the Silicon Graphics® / MIPS® chip."

Tim Stamper, managing director of Rare Ltd. and designer of *Donkey Kong Country*: "Once the world's video game developers spend time exploring this incredible Nintendo Ultra 64 chipset, you'll see gaming jump far beyond anything that currently exists on any platform."

ISSUE #72: **MAY 1995**

ISSUE #73: **JUNE 1995**

LOST IN UNTRANSLATION
ZANGEKI NO REGINLEIV

Swords vs. giants! The Western world missed out on an epic battle!

HAD IT NOT been for fan-driven campaigns like Operation Rainfall, there's a good possibility Western gamers would have missed out on three of Wii's late-gen gems: Xenoblade Chronicles, The Last Story and Pandora's Tower. These titles, which all launched in Japan between 2010 and 2011, captured the attention of fans around the world not only for their mature tone, but also for Nintendo's apparent reticence to bring them to other territories, inspiring a groundswell of support for their localization.

Whether or not these fan campaigns actually convinced Nintendo to release these titles overseas is subject to debate, but it's hard not to wonder if a similar grassroots movement would have changed the fate of Zangeki no Reginleiv, another mature, late-gen Wii title. Developed by Sandlot, the studio behind the Earth Defense Force series, Zangeki no Reginleiv arrived in February 2010, before any of the games that Operation Rainfall championed — but it would not garner nearly the same level of international interest, and it ultimately never made it out of Japan.

That may be just as well, though. While Xenoblade, Last Story and Pandora's Tower were all met with varying degrees of praise, Zangeki no Reginleiv received a much more mixed reception. Even by Wii's meager graphical standards, the game was admonished for being quite ugly — animations were stiff, physics were wonky and environments were sparse. Likewise, while the Rainfall trio all weaved compelling, emotional tales, Zangeki's story — despite being rooted in Norse mythology — was practically nonexistent; a thin thread that tied the game's straightforward hack-and-slash missions together.

That's not to say the title had no interesting qualities, however — Sandlot had some ambitious ideas for Zangeki no Reginleiv. For one, the game featured hundreds of distinct weapons, as well as an online co-op mode that allowed up to four players to complete missions together. It also starred two protagonists: Freyr and Freyja, twin warriors who were charged with defending Midgard against invading giants. Each hero had a unique playstyle: Freyr battled primarily using melee weapons such as swords and hammers, while Freyja was more adept at ranged combat, able to pepper foes from afar with arrows and magic spells.

As one of these two warriors, players would select a mission and then slice their way through waves of giant ogres. Being a Wii game, Zangeki no Reginleiv made extensive use of motion controls (although the game offered a more traditional control scheme as well). The Wii Remote served as a makeshift sword; each swing translated to a slash on the screen, so players could cut up foes by waving the controller around, or perform a dodge roll by shaking the Nunchuk.

The game's most distinctive characteristic, however, was its surprising violence. Every enemy that Freyr and Freyja faced could be hacked into pieces, blood spurting from each dismembered limb as they were strewn around the screen — a stark contrast to Nintendo's usual family-friendly offerings. This over-the-top violence earned the game a D from the CERO ratings board (Japan's equivalent of the ESRB's M rating), making it the first Nintendo-published title to carry that rating.

Despite its mediocre reviews, Zangeki no Reginleiv would be a modest success, placing among the top 20 best-selling Wii games of 2010. That would be the end of Freyr and Frejya's story, however. Aside from a digital rerelease on the Wii U eShop in 2015 — again, only in Japan — the game would never see a follow-up. Meanwhile, Operation Rainfall darling Xenoblade Chronicles kickstarted an entire franchise! It's doubtful Zangeki no Reginleiv would have had the same level of success even if it were released overseas, but it makes you wonder what could have been if fans had championed it instead. **— KEVIN K.**

ORIGINAL RELEASE: Wii, FEBRUARY 11, 2010
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: SANDLOT

THE BLACK BOX

Publishing a game so filled with gore was so far out of the normal comfort zone for Nintendo that the company must have felt compelled to clearly set its package apart from the rest of the Wii's family-safe wares. Thus, a unique black variant of the normal white box art template was born! Zangeki no Reginleiv pioneered the color shift, but future mature games were all forced to take the black as well.

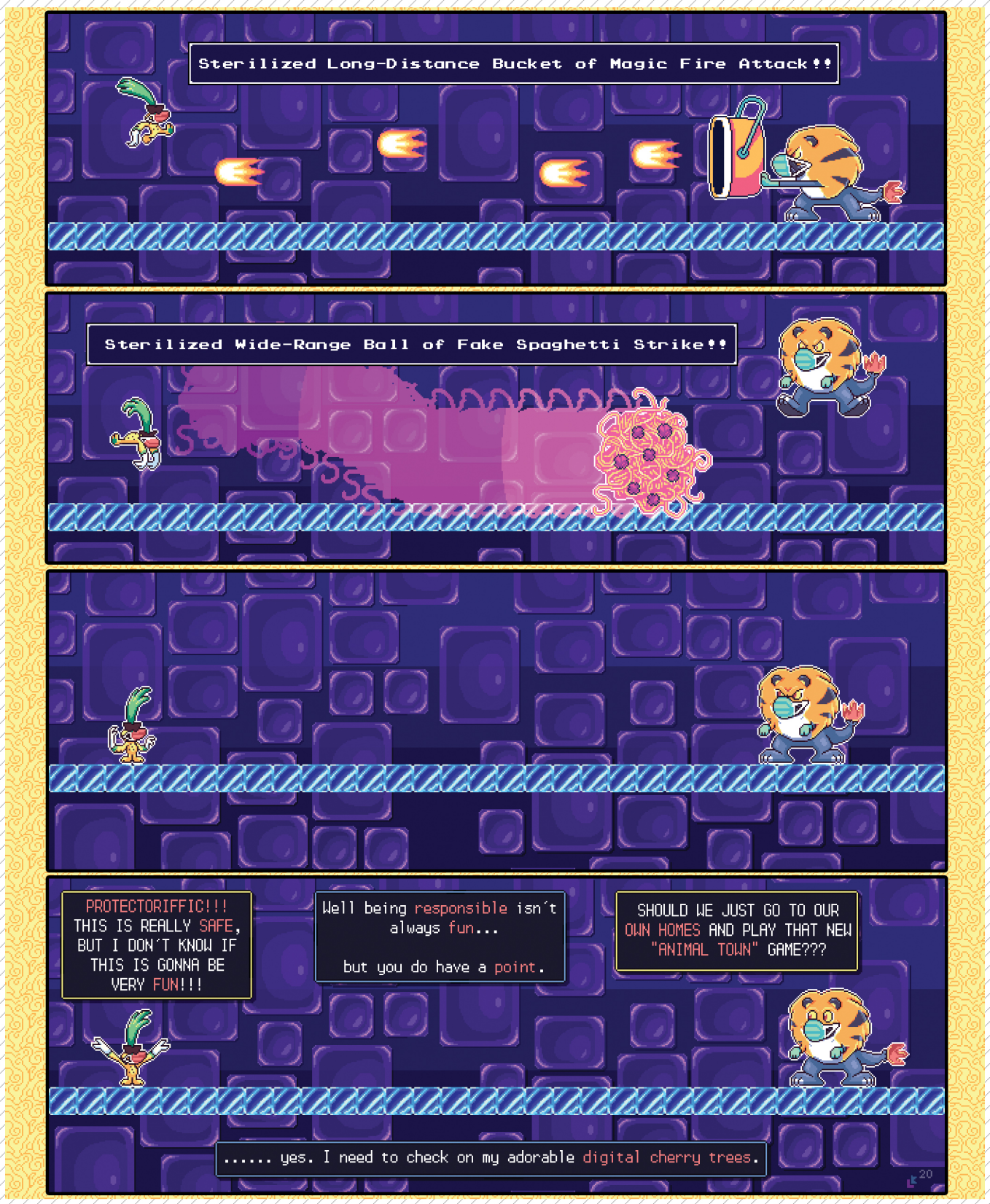
INCREDIBLE ART!

Perhaps the most painful part of missing out on getting this game in the West — at least from a magazine-publishing point of view — is the fact that we also missed out on its incredible promo art! How amazing would a magazine cover or wall poster of these epic images have been? Alas, 'twas not to be.

REST 0

by LLK

the sitcom starring a final boss and an obnoxious '90s video game mascot who are being careful and protecting themselves from getting sick



BY LINDSEY LAYNE KING

DATE & PLACE OF BIRTH
January 11, 1980, in the Province of Quebec, Canada

FAVORITE FOOD
A bento full of sushi and kushiyaki!

LITTLE-KNOWN FACTS
I love shows and documentaries about alien life and astronomy in general. Even the far-fetched stuff is fascinating!

CURRENT POSITION IN THE INDUSTRY
President and Co-Founder of Tribute Games

BEST KNOWN FOR
Doing pixel art since the GBA days, designing Scott Pilgrim vs. the World: The Game and making new old-school games at Tribute.

JONATHAN LAVIGNE

Honoring the past while blazing a trail into the future, it's the head honcho of Tribute Games!

INTERVIEW BY JONATHAN HOLMES

NF: How did you get your start in games?
JONATHAN: I started working in games at Gameloft in 2002. Before that I had studied graphic design, 3D animation and drew a lot for fun too. I was hired to do pixel art for Java phone games. It was a really interesting period because in a very short amount of time, cellphone games evolved from 1-bit graphics to full-color 3D. It felt like I had worked through the era of Game & Watch, Game Boy, SNES and Nintendo 64, all within two years!

Before you went indie, you were tasked to "demake" a lot of realistic characters from other media and transform them into 2D sprites. What are some of the most difficult and interesting artistic challenges you've faced?
I'd say that Open Season for Game Boy Advance at Ubisoft was the most interesting and difficult artistic challenge I've had. It's a 3D animated movie, but it also used beautiful concept art influenced by Eyvind Earle (Sleeping Beauty) for its backgrounds. So we had to capture this combination of styles with pixel art. At the time, we didn't even know of the term "demake," but that describes pretty well what we were doing: transforming highly detailed paintings and 3D models into small 2D sprites with the highest possible fidelity. We weren't intentionally making it retro though.

Rumor has it that the Star Wars: Episode III – Revenge of the Sith game you worked on for the GBA might have had a direct influence on the final version of the film. What can you tell us about that?
When I was working on the GBA version of Star Wars: Episode III, I had to make the ending of the game similar to what you'd see in the movie. There's a shot at the end where you see Darth Vader and Palpatine looking at the Death Star being built. However, I did not have any visual or concept art for what a half-built version of the Death Star should look like. I emailed our contact at Lucasfilm and they didn't have anything they could share yet, so my contact tried his best to describe it in his reply . . . from that written description, I designed a Death Star for the ending of the game. When I saw the same shot in the movie when it came out, I was surprised to see how close the Death Star of the movie was to the version I drew for the game! I'd like to believe that an artist at Lucasfilm saw my version and was inspired by it . . . but I don't think that's the case, haha! It's probably a combination of a well-written description and luck!

What inspired you to break off from work for hire and start your own studio, and why did you decide to call it Tribute Games?
When I first started working in games, I realized that the rapid shift to 3D games left space for a lot of untapped potential with 2D games. It had only been five to 15 years, but a lot of gamers were already feeling nostalgic for the NES and SNES era. I was part of that group, and it's what ignited my desire to start a studio.

We didn't entirely choose when we were going to stop doing work for hire and form our studio . . . it kinda just happened because the timing was right. In 2011, there were less and less opportunities to work on 2D games in big studios, and digital markets had become a great option for smaller studios to publish their own projects. So we decided to leave our jobs and keep doing what we're good at! Jean-Francois Major (programmer), Justin Cyr (animator) and myself (designer) teamed up and started Tribute Games.

We chose Tribute because we wanted to pay homage to the games we loved playing when we were kids. Honestly though, the idea came from Issue #260 of Nintendo Power! It featured a "26-Page Tribute" to NES games. There it was – the name was perfect!

For an indie studio, you've been extremely prolific, having put out a new game about every 18 months. That's a lot more than most studios your size are capable of. What is it about Tribute that makes this massive level of output possible?
When working on GBA titles, we had some production cycles last only seven months! All veterans at Tribute come from that background – one where you had to be extremely disciplined with your production schedule.

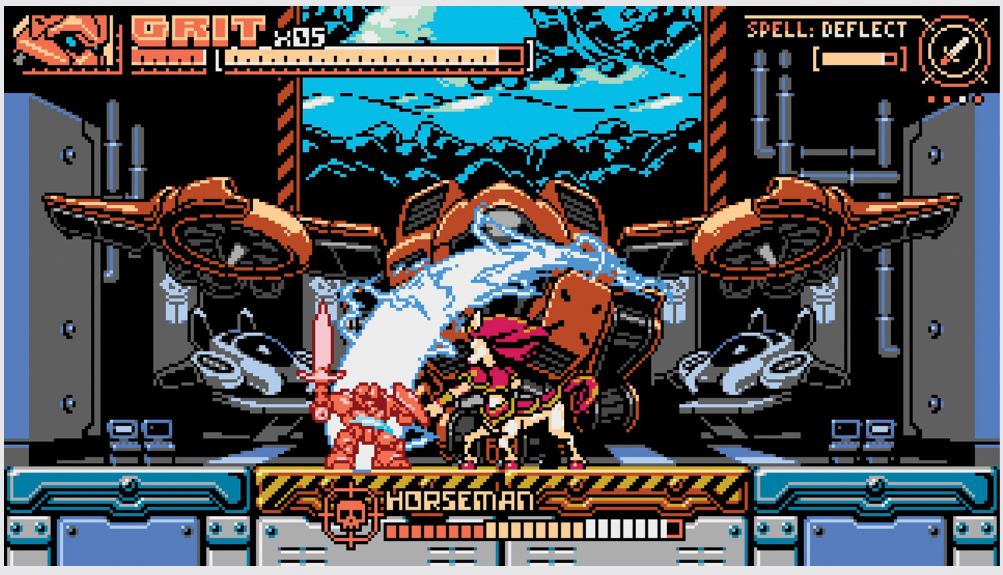
We decided to keep that discipline as part of our company values, while giving us enough time to produce very high-quality titles. Another factor is that we're not reinventing the wheel with our titles. Sure, we want to find new ideas and innovate, but we stick to what we know is fun. Plus, there are plenty of examples of the kinds of games we want to make: thousands of games on NES, Sega Master System, SNES, Genesis and TurboGrafx-16!

I see people online talking about the Scott Pilgrim game almost every day. Seeing how Platinum just worked out a deal with Nintendo to self-publish The Wonderful 101: Remastered, do you think it's at all possible for you to get the rights back for your work on Scott Pilgrim for a Switch release? If so, how much would you have to crowdfund to make it happen?
Believe me, we see it too, haha! We'd gladly work on a Switch port, even without any crowdfunding!

Unfortunately, it's out of our hands. We don't own any of it. Scott Pilgrim has become a symbol of what can happen to digital-only licensed games: The license expires, it gets delisted and it disappears forever. I don't want to sound too pessimistic, but since there are multiple parties involved with this license, it's very unlikely that we'll see this game back on the market anytime soon. However, I'd love to be wrong, and our door is open if there's a chance of it happening!

Panzer Paladin feels a lot like Zelda II crossed with Blaster Master, though in my opinion it outdoes both of those games in the boss fight department. Where Zelda II had a reverse centaur (a man with the head of a horse), your game has the world's first reverse-reverse centaur (a horse with the arms of a man and the head and body of . . . a horse again?!?). What inspired your team to build this strange and exciting world of mechs and monsters?
The idea initially came from a bunch of stuff I was exposed to a few years back. All around the same time I played through Demon's Souls, watched Pacific Rim in theaters, binged Attack on Titan and saw the huge Gundam statue in Tokyo during my trip to Japan. It formed some kind of blob in my mind of all these things combined and started giving me a lot of drive for a game with robots vs. giant demons. Specifically, a clash between the theme of the occult and the theme of technology.

The identity of the game solidified better with time: It took five years from the first idea to the start of the production. We took inspiration from different things that we felt worked well together, such as mecha animes and Super Sentai series combined with



research on mythologies and melee weapons from around the world. We started detailing the characters and story of the game from there. Demons in various mythologies are already weird and exciting, so it wasn't too hard to bridge the gap and adapt them to the world of Panzer Paladin.

How will sword collecting complement Panzer Paladin's stage-based action and platforming design?
What you can do with weapons in Panzer Paladin is core to the game. It's a system that encourages players to experiment. The first thing I wanted to avoid when designing this weapon system was to have players hoard them and then end up never using them.

The collecting aspects of Panzer Paladin complement the game's stage-based action in the sense that these weapons will make your playthrough more fun and potentially easier if you use them freely. You get temporary magic powers by breaking weapons, so don't hesitate to break a few of them to boost your attack or defense (or both!) and heal yourself! You can also make use these weapons in many other ways throughout the levels: You can throw a weapon to hit a faraway enemy, you can use them to set checkpoints or you can melt them down in-between levels in exchange for small permanent health upgrades.

There's also a risk/reward aspect in the weapon collecting. If you hoard too many of them, the game will get harder and a mini-boss will appear to challenge you. But if you use them all, you'll be unarmed and have to use your "Panzer Punch" to attack until you find more. You're never defenseless, though – the Paladin is still strong enough even unarmed, and there are weapons aplenty in every level.

Panzer Paladin has a light, fun look, but the underlying story is pretty heavy, with the human race threatened by an invading evil that initially leave them defenseless. It's only by taking the demons' power and turning it against them that they stand a chance to prevent armageddon. What inspired you to come up with this grave tale, and how do you think it might reflect current anxieties about global pandemics, climate change, political conflicts and other issues facing the world today?
I had no deep philosophical or political thoughts when I came up with the story of the game. When I design a game, I always put the gameplay first, then tailor the story to serve and bring forth the gameplay as best it can. I do however think that having an underlying axiom or moral principle in a story makes it stronger. In the case of Panzer Paladin, it's the idea that everyone has a little bit of good and evil inside them. No one is really "lawful good." That's why in Panzer Paladin, good is represented by technology (Flame and Grit, the playable characters), and evil by the forces of the occult. Humans stand somewhere in the middle and can't do anything against the demons by themselves. In the story, humans who tried to wield the "Spirit Weapons" in order to fight back against the demons became corrupted by their dark magic and turned into demons themselves. Only robots are pure, without ulterior motives, and can fight the invasion.

I do think it somehow reflects people's anxieties, but it was completely unconscious. We didn't deliberately try to draw parallels with real issues the world is facing. I'm afraid there isn't much to read between the lines, haha! But you know, games speak differently to each person!

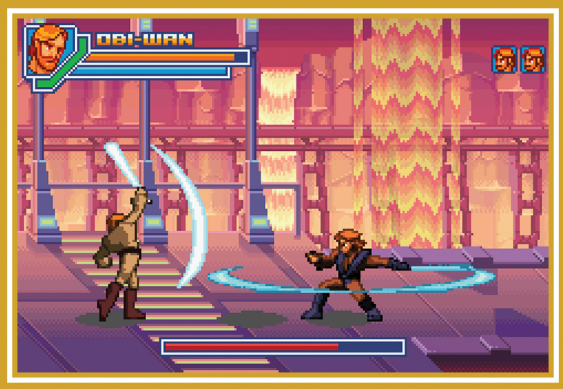
With the new Blaster Master Zero games doing well on Switch, any thoughts of a Panzer Paladin crossover? Master Paladin: Panzer Blaster has quite a ring to it . . .
Oh! I think Jason and Sophia would indeed make fine partners for Flame and Grit! I wonder if the good folks at Inti Creates would like this?

If you had unlimited creative freedom and an endless budget to make a game in any Nintendo franchise, which would you pick and what would you make?
Metroid. Fans have been asking for an all-new 2D Metroid for a long time and after Nintendo, we're the second best choice to make it happen, haha! I wouldn't make anything funky with the license. I would treat it with respect and make the best possible 2D Metroid game. And . . . if you allow me another game, StarTropics would be a very close second choice!

Finally, if you could have any superpower, what would it be and why?
I'd love to be able to teleport! . . . But like in game design, it would need some limitations to stay fun. Maybe I could use this superpower to only teleport once or twice a year. I wouldn't want to become jaded by having seen too much too quickly. I'd want the act of travelling the world to stay fresh and keep its magic!

JONATHAN'S GAMEOGRAPHY

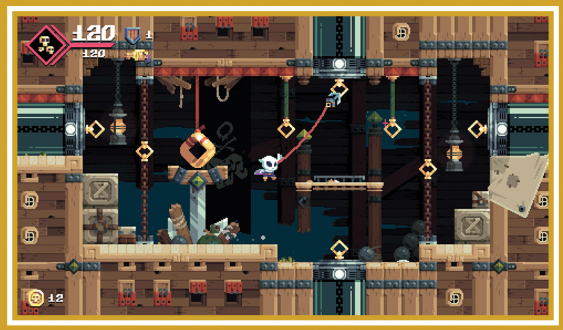
Don't sleep on movie tie-ins! In Jonathan's case, hard work on licensed games paved the way for him to find independent success later on!



STAR WARS: EPISODE III – REVENGE OF THE SITH
(GAME BOY ADVANCE, 2005)

OPEN SEASON
(GAME BOY ADVANCE, 2006)

SCOTT PILGRIM VS. THE WORLD: THE GAME
(PLAYSTATION 3 & XBOX 360, 2010)



FLINTHOOK
(PLAYSTATION 4, XBOX ONE, PC & SWITCH, 2017)

BY MATTHEW TARANTO

REVIEWS

There's no Honedge here. No Zacian biting that great big blade, and not even a Sirfetch'd wielding its massive leek. But no matter! This crew of plucky Pokémon adventurers isn't going to let a lack of swords stop them from becoming the world's greatest rescue team! Turn the page to read our full review of Pokémon Mystery Dungeon: Rescue Team DX!

What Have I Become? I'm a Monster!

POKÉMON MYSTERY DUNGEON: RESCUE TEAM DX

IT HAPPENED AGAIN.

I woke up one morning, opened my eyes and found myself lying in a forest . . . only I wasn't myself. I was someone else. Some*thing* else. I had been transformed into a Treecko!

I wasn't too surprised, though, to tell you the truth. Because this has actually happened to me before! The first time was coming up on 14 years ago, when I first played Pokémon Mystery Dungeon: Red Rescue Team on the Game Boy Advance. It's perhaps poetic that I'd become a Treecko once more when I decided to step into the world of the new Rescue Team DX on the Switch!

. . . OK, well, it was no coincidence. I picked Treecko because it's my favorite. The quiz tried to peg me as a Mudkip! Can you believe that? Bah!

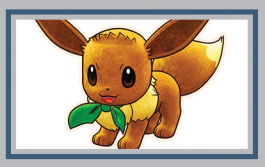
I chose Treecko as my own Poké persona and selected Squirtle as my rescue team partner, just the same as I did back in 2006. But I approached this new spin on that old adventure with much more resolve. I only played the GBA version for maybe an hour or two years ago before setting it aside and forgetting about it — because Mystery Dungeon games can be tough to get into, and I just didn't get into it. I've done better with later installments in this same series since — perhaps having developed more patience as I've grown older — and I'm pleased to say that Rescue Team DX didn't want to make me bounce out the door so soon this time around. I caution any first-time Mystery Dungeon players, though — this is not nearly as accessible as most other Pokémon games.

An overall introduction is in order. The Mystery Dungeon series has been around for ages, and the Pokémon-branded entries are just one branch in a large and confusing family tree. Lots of different franchises have sent their heroes to explore these depths, so the protagonists are almost always unique from game to game. The unifying element that keeps the series all connected is that each game features dungeon layouts that are generated randomly. In Rescue Team DX, for example, you'll first explore an area called Tiny Woods. You'll walk through a mazelike set of open rooms and tight corridors searching for staircases to lead you to the next floor, and ultimately you'll find your way to the exit. But then the next time you enter Tiny Woods, every floor layout — every position of every room and corridor — will be totally mixed up. You never see the same structure twice.

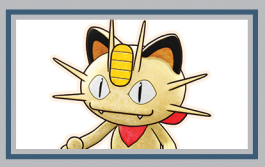
Being unable to memorize level layouts add to the difficulty of these Mystery Dungeon quests. But that's just the beginning! These games are famously challenging beyond that too, with turn-based combat featuring foes that each move one step every time you take one step. You have to align your characters properly to attack them and trade blows until they faint.

SWITCH PUBLISHERS: NINTENDO & THE POKÉMON COMPANY
DEVELOPER: SPIKE CHUNSOFT RATING: E

PIKACHU



EEVEE



MEOWTH

PSYDUCK

MACHOP

CUBONE

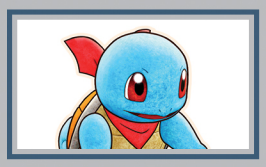
SKITTY

THE SWEET SIXTEEN

If you'd rather not follow in my footsteps and also find yourself shapeshifted into the Hoenn region's Grass starter, there are 15 other available options! All the starters from the first three generations are here, joined by a handful of well-loved old-school alternatives too. Psyduck doesn't make sense to me as a primary protagonist, but hey, you do you! You'll play as your chosen 'mon through the entire main quest, so choose wisely!

BULBASAUR

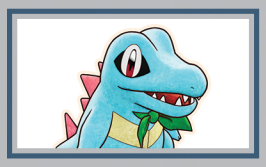
CHARMANDER



SQUIRTLE

CHIKORITA

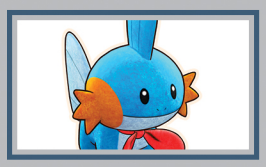
CYNDAQUIL



TOTODILE

TREECKO

TORCHIC



MUDKIP

There's more! You also have to manage an overflowing inventory of items to keep your health up, make sure your moves don't run out of uses and deal with status effects that will be inflicted upon you and your allies. You have to manage your array of allies too, recruiting new members to your rescue team in the middle of dungeons, and making sure you've got "camps" set up as places for them to live after the current dungeon is finished, or else they won't be able to join you permanently. You have to deal with a "Hunger" mechanic that discourages aimless exploration — if you spend too long walking and wandering around, your Pokémon will get grumbly tummies and start to lose HP as a penalty.

There's still more! You've got to deal with half a dozen different shops in the hub village between missions, organizing money, working to level up your allies, linking moves together . . .

It's a lot. Rescue Team DX has made some strides in streamlining a few things compared to the source material this remake's adapting, but even still there's a whole lot to juggle here, especially compared to the more straightforward and easier-to-get-into Pokémon games like Sword & Shield.

8.0

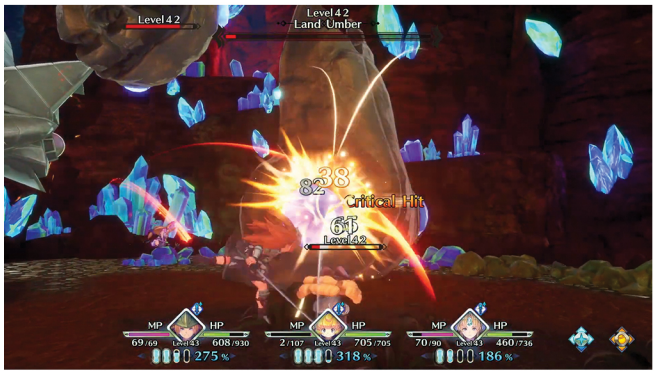
This is a Mystery Dungeon game first and foremost, and a Pokémon game second. That's critical to remember.

I knew all that going in, and I'd mentally prepared myself for the challenge this time around, so I ended up enjoying myself quite a bit! I especially loved how beautifully the art style was updated — it's a gorgeous watercolor-like look that just feels so warm and inviting. The music, too, has been re-recorded and made extra exquisite. All aspects of presentation are on point.

One key letdown I alluded to back on Page 63, though, is that this is a pretty strict remake of the original Rescue Team games from 14 years ago — so newer Pokémon characters like Honedge, Zacian and Sirfetch'd are nowhere to be found. Gen VI's Mega Evolution makes an appearance, so the Pokémon legacy of the past decade isn't entirely ignored, but I'm sad that my Treecko couldn't be joined by a Froakie or a Rowlet or a Sobble for this adventure.

Perhaps this is just the first step into the next era for Pokémon Mystery Dungeon though. Maybe the developers chose to do a remake in order to get the new art style set up, and with that now landed, the next sequel in the series will bring us a new cast of characters from Sun & Moon and Sword & Shield. I need to see a little Scorbunny with a rescue team ribbon!

In the meanwhile, I'll make due with what we've been given here. I wish this game weren't quite so jam-packed full of different things to have to keep track of and that its difficulty level had been toned down a bit too (or at least that there'd been an option for doing that), because while I had fun finding myself transformed into a Treecko once again, I'm reticent to recommend this experience to anyone who hasn't already explored a few other Mystery Dungeons in the past. Younger Poké fans should stick with other games. Older ones? Feel free to become a monster! **— LUCAS**



And So the Trials Begin Again!

TRIALS OF MANA

2018'S REMAKE OF Secret of Mana enhanced all of the graphics and introduced voiced cutscenes, but the view was still top-down and very little had changed in gameplay. The anomaly of bringing Trials of Mana — previously a 16-bit top-down RPG — into a fully 3D world begs scrutiny and exploration, and so far the developers have managed to keep the retro feel while completely transforming the gameplay for the better. Jumping was added both in and out of combat, making battles more dynamic and exploration more rewarding. In fact, there are myriad changes the developers made. Some bring the game into a modern era, while others are questionable.

To start, you pick three characters out of six. The first is your main character that essentially decides the plotline, while the others have side stories related to the main character. When you run across one of your side characters in the game, you have a choice whether to play their intro or view a quick cutscene to sum it up. I played all six.

The game now contains voices for many characters — for better or for worse. Some are well done, like Duran, Reisz and Hawkeye, while others are more cringeworthy, like Angela, Kevin and Charlotte. Kevin has trouble with English because he's a beastman/human hybrid, but that doesn't translate well into his voice acting or the way he's animated. Charlotte suffers from both rhotacism and lambdacism due to her human/elf background leaving her physique young-looking, but they lean on it too hard. Angela inexplicably sounds like a valley girl, and while she is a precocious princess, that choice is contrary to her trauma.

Many animations lack polish too, so close-ups are often an odd choice. The environments are gorgeous and reminiscent of their 16-bit counterparts. To make them more explorable, many glowing spots and treasure chests have been added in all areas. While these areas are more interesting, it means all of those spots need a reward. Most are filled with small amounts of the game's currency, Lucre, but I also ended up with 33 Candies and many other regenerative items by just the end of the demo. The original game was more stingy.

Your HP refills with every level you gain, and there are also breakable pots that can restore your health, so I had no occasion to use items even on Hard difficulty. Early RPG areas rarely yield much challenge, but if the rate of collectables remains constant, the entire game will be too easy. Enemy attacks are — so far — telegraphed with giant red areas, so it's almost embarrassing to take damage. The complex menu system — much of which is accessible via the cluttered HUD — retains the Ring System for consumables and magic and is regulated to the D-Pad. A moves list, your HP and MP, a mini-map and quest reminder complete your HUD, until a battle is won and the screen is filled with what you won, EXP info and other stats. Some of it is customizable, but it can be intrusive.

The music is great. It isn't too flourished compared to the original — which is also available in the sub menu — and adds to the visuals appropriately. There is a fair amount of re-use in later areas if memory serves, so we will see how the developers deal with that as I play on.

Much remains to be seen, so a more in-depth review is necessary. I'll see you next issue with the results! In the meanwhile, feel free to begin your own test of Trials by downloading the free eShop demo! **— BRETT**

IN PROGRESS

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: SQUARE ENIX RATING: T

A Slasher Film Comes to Life

FRIDAY THE 13TH: THE GAME – ULTIMATE SLASHER EDITION

CAN YOU BELIEVE it's been over a decade since the last Friday the 13th movie came out? The iconic horror franchise used to see new installments on a regular basis, but a nasty legal battle over the franchise rights has kept Jason from the big screen for quite some time. That means slasher fans have had to turn to other mediums for their Friday fix.

That's where Friday the 13th: The Game – Ultimate Slasher Edition comes into play. This 2019 Switch release of a 2017 Kickstarter project aims to connect fans with the franchise on an even deeper level. Instead of watching camp counselors as they try to escape Jason's clutches, you now play as one of those unlucky souls in a fight for your life. Or, depending on how things play out online, you could end up taking on the role of Jason yourself. Either way, Friday the 13th: The Game manages to keep your blood pumping and nerves on edge every time you play.

You'll spend the majority of your time in Friday the 13th playing as a camp counselor. At the start of a "match," you'll be plopped down into a camp setting with multiple randomly placed components. Your job is to find a way out of that camp within the 20-minute time limit. You can escape by boat, car or with help from the police. Each step requires you to fulfill certain tasks in order to have a chance at escaping. The cars will need keys, gasoline and a battery. The boats need gasoline and a propeller. If you want the help of the cops, you'll have to find a fuse for a fuse box, which then lets you access a phone to make your call to 911.

On the flip side, playing as Jason gives you just one job: You're out to kill every single counselor in the game. Lucky for Jason, he has a number of different superpowered abilities to help him become an unstoppable killing machine. You can warp around the map at the press of a button, turn on a super stealth mode so that counselors can't hear you, turn on an echolocation-style option to better see where your prey is, and so on. While there may be way more counselors than Jason, it's easy to see that the game is very heavily weighted toward Jason's success. That's what makes it so much fun!

When you're a counselor, you really feel the stress of trying to escape Jason's deadly intent. You never know when he could be sneaking around a corner, ready to punch your head off or lop off your arms . . . literally! In the role of Jason, you feel almost unstoppable, capable of snatching counselors in an instant and doing away with them with a number of over-the-top finishing moves. The different counselors do have unique traits that make them better/worse than others, and you can spend in-game points to roll new perks that could give you fighting chance. Jason also has different abilities depending on which version you play as, and you can unlock new "fatalities" as well.

Friday the 13th: The Game does a great job at nailing the vibe of the film franchise. Running from Jason is extremely intense, and thanks to the random elements, each potential getaway feels exciting and fresh. The fact that the game's main mode is all online only helps to immerse you, as working with real-life people to escape makes the experience extremely rewarding.

The Ultimate Slasher Edition on Switch might not be the prettiest version of the game, and there are a couple hiccups along the way, but the core experience is still an undeniably fun one. With online servers still brimming with players, there's plenty of reason to hop in on this one right now. **– KEVIN C.**

8.0

SWITCH PUBLISHER: GUN MEDIA
DEVELOPER: BLACK TOWER STUDIOS
RATING: M

My Life on a Deserted Island

ANIMAL CROSSING: NEW HORIZONS

For my review of Animal Crossing: New Horizons, I decided to do something a little different than what I usually write. So I'd like all of you to imagine that you're reading from my Resident Representative's picture diary . . .

DAY ONE

We've arrived! I've never ridden on a seaplane before in my life, but everything went smoothly. I was welcomed by Tom Nook and his twin nephews Timmy and Tommy, who gave me and my new friends Renée and Rowan our own NookPhones and set us loose on the island. After fulfilling a few simple tasks and learning how to build simple tools, we toasted the newly christened Strawberry Island with pear juice before turning in for the night. I pitched my tent right by the river, with the beach steps away and with a waterfall right behind it. Hopefully we'll be exploring more of the island in a few days!

DAY TWO

I started gathering resources around the island with the tools that the Nooks taught me how to build — although sometimes it feels like I'm playing Breath of the Wild with how much they're breaking! Luckily, everything is in plentiful supply, but it's a chore having to trek all the way back to the place where I set my DIY bench to remake my tools. What's more, I've had to outrun swarms of angry wasps as well as (gulp!) tarantulas. I don't want to talk about the tarantulas.

The airport also opened, and I met the dodo brothers Orville and Wilbur when I redeemed my free Nook Miles Ticket to visit another uncharted island. One thing I wish they had at the airport was access to your storage space, like the train stations from Wild World and New Leaf. There are all sorts of uncharted islands that you can visit — islands that have hybrid flowers, rare fish or even (gulp again!) *infinite* tarantulas. On the island I went to, there was another visitor — Hornsby — who was looking for a new place to live, and I mentioned Strawberry Island to him. I'll have a new neighbor soon!

DAY THREE

Tom Nook introduced me to his friend, Blathers, who's interested in opening a museum and is accepting donations of bugs, fish and fossils. (I'm guessing there's not much of a demand for fine art anymore?)

I visited a couple of friends who had just gotten established on their islands, and we traded letters and presents with each other. One of them sent me a bunch of peaches, and I planted some of them on my island. That's another stamp on one of my Nook Miles goal cards — there's a lot of them that fill up as you reach milestones like catching fish and bugs, museum donations and even selling seashells by the seashore. There are also goals that replenish as I achieve them, which keeps the Nook Miles rolling in at a good clip. So far, I've earned enough to buy myself some upgrades. I've gotten an expansion to my inventory, as well as a new tool selection system. You can set your tools to the eight directions of the Joy-Con in a menu you open with the Up Button. It's really convenient, and helped me out in a pinch when I knocked down a wasp nest!

DAY FOUR

We've now got a store on the island: Nook's Cranny! Timmy and Tommy oversee it, and they've got a rotating selection of different items to decorate my house. Yes, I'm now in a house! It's small and only has one room, but Tom Nook has promised me loans to expand. I like the fact that I can pay my loans directly out of my savings whenever I use the ABD — it's the little quality-of-life changes like these that make living here a lot easier than it was in New Leaf.

The only downside is that Tom Nook's been putting me to work. Not only am I in charge of laying out housing plots and constructing a bridge, but I'm also making interior and exterior furniture for the housing plots. It takes a lot of work and materials! I wish there were some sort of on-screen checklist to keep track of all these. He also gave me instructions for

how to build a ladder (or is it a step-ladder?) so I could climb the cliffs and hills for more materials — like the roses that were hiding on top. I've heard that eventually we'll be able to start terraforming the island, but for now that goal seems out of reach . . .

DAY FIVE

The museum is now open! Finally, I could take all the bugs, fish and fossils I'd been hoarding and bring them down to Blathers to have them appraised and donated. And then I wandered the halls . . . everything's *amazing*. The fossil hall has spots on the carpet where you can stand and get a better view of some of the bigger displays. The aquarium has various natural habitat displays for both the freshwater and saltwater fish, and there's a glass tunnel through the deep sea tank that's fun to walk through. And the insect hall . . . part of it's a forest setting, but the butterflies are in a beautiful garden gazebo with lots of flowers and a koi fountain! It's so beautiful!

I also went to Tom Nook's customization seminar and learned how to customize furniture. Finally, I have a real bed! No more camp cot! I even built and customized some tables and a wardrobe to match. We've also had a few new arrivals on the island that I've met using the Nook Miles Tickets along with Hornsby, like Alice and Pinky. They seem to like their new digs, so I'm glad someone appreciates my hard work!

Speaking of storage space, it took me as many Nook Miles to pay for an expansion of my personal inventory as it did to pay off my first home loan, and stuff like drawers and refrigerators (?) are now used for changing clothes instead of storage. What we get with our house is a storage space that slowly expands as we make new additions, but when it's just one room, it fills up *fast*. Luckily, it's OK to leave stuff outside wherever you want, and I'm sure my neighbors liked looking at all the fish and bugs gathering dust and pollen outside.

DAY SIX

The hedgehog that I saw talking with Timmy and Tommy the other day when Nook's Cranny first opened formally introduced herself to me as Mabel, who wanted to set up business as a clothing seller. I went to her stall to check out a few of the outfits she had and got some new clothes. There's some pretty neat stuff — tops and bottoms, one-piece outfits, shoes, socks and accessories — and apparently she knows a guy who sells shoes and handbags who might be stopping by every so often too.

I've been doing a lot of fishing lately, but one thing that would really help things out would be the ability to make multiple bags of bait at once. There are some things that automatically stack in my inventory — like shells and fruit — but not the manila clams that I use for bait. What's even more inconvenient is that I can only make one item at a time, and that I must have everything in my pockets in order to craft. I can hammer on the A Button to speed things up, but it's not the same. I'm going to catch that stringfish if it takes me until the end of March!

DAY EIGHT

I woke up to see that the construction of the Resident Services building had been completed, and Tom Nook's new coworker, Isabelle, introduced herself! I went in to talk to her and she showed me how to change my town's song and flag, and Tom Nook told me of the new plan he wanted me to help him with: getting the legendary K.K. Slider to perform a concert! In order to do so, I needed to pretty up the place and attract more islanders, so Tom directed me to build a campground.

I put it right on the beach so whoever camps there has a wonderful view when they wake up in the morning. I also decided to pay the money to put in another bridge across the river, which doesn't come cheap — although it was nice to see Lloid the Gyroid again. (I wonder where all his, uh, *relatives* are?) I've got a lot of good ideas thanks to visits to other islands and a few interesting items I've found in the Nook Miles catalog.

DAY NINE

Today I spent some time on another island that was the home to a member of the Boston StreetPass community. Their island was set in the southern hemisphere, which meant I could catch some fish and bugs that won't appear until autumn on my island. They also had some interesting stuff put up — like a massive kaiju statue that played music and breathed smoke! There were seven of us on the island, but the only time it was a major hassle was when people were coming and going — we all had to wait and watch a status screen as their flights arrived at the airport. Sometimes someone would leave right when someone else was catching a fish, and then they'd lose their catch, so we started asking each other if it

was OK to go using the voice channel. We did have a lot of fun running around and looking at all the neat features, and I had some really good luck with fishing!

DAY TEN

Whenever I go out, I see my fellow villagers going about their business — some of them do exercises out on the plaza, or have a snack under a tree, or sit on a bench and read. Sometimes I see someone out singing a song, which is really cute! I didn't know Rowan was a singer (with all his talk about bulking up and protein shakes), but every day here is full of surprises. Every day when I go around to say hi to the villagers, sometimes I see them working on their own DIY project and they always share the recipe with me.

I decided to spend some time today making Pro Designs. Unfortunately, there's no touchscreen support when making custom designs, which would make things so much easier! However, I did make a sweater that would be of interest to anyone who might want to cosplay a certain spiky-haired lawyer! Best of all, I not only had my first camper (Keaton), but Mabel came by for a visit and announced she was going to open a permanent shop here! I can't wait to see her full inventory!

DAY ELEVEN

Tom Nook gave me the good news that I was able to use my amiibo card collection to invite whatever villagers I wanted to my island! I grabbed the amiibo card for Twiggy out of my binder and immediately scanned it to summon her to the campsite, but after I made her the furniture she requested, she turned me down . . . but mentioned that if I asked her again, she might say yes. So there's still hope! Also, I finally filled out my stamp card when Lucas came to visit, bringing the oranges that I was missing.

DAY TWELVE

The new Able Sisters shop opened, and I took some time to visit and was amazed by the selection. I wanted to get a pair of eyeglasses in every color they had, but in order to do that, I needed to use the fitting room multiple times, which was a bit of a drag. There was also a kiosk where you are able to download and share Pro Designs you've created (if you've got a Nintendo Switch Online account) by entering a code for a creator or a specific creation. There were a lot of neat and interesting designs that I was collecting codes for, so I downloaded as many as possible and spent the afternoon swirling about the island in fluffy dresses and hats that looked like cakes!

DAY FOURTEEN

I woke up this morning to see that most of the trees around me had burst into bloom, like a sea of cotton candy! There were also petals flying about in the wind that I was able to snag with my net, but there were also . . . eggs? There were eggs growing in the trees, eggs buried in the dirt, eggs that appeared when I tried to gather wood, eggs from pastel-striped floating balloon presents . . . and then I met Zipper, a yellow "rabbit" who told me that this was in preparation for Bunny Day, and to collect as many as possible. They kept popping up even when I fished, and I was lucky that I didn't break the fishing streak that C.J. challenged me to! This has been one weird April Fool's Day . . .

DAY FIFTEEN

OK, that's enough eggs. Seriously.

DAY SIXTEEN

Wonderful news: It took me three tries, but I finally got Twiggy to move to the island! I had a nice housing plot picked out for her and everything. Made me wonder if everyone's going to be this hard to persuade? I admit, it was a little tough because at one point she asked me to make her some cardboard furniture, and I had to ask around my circle of friends for some boxes. But it was all worth it in the end, cheepers!

I've also started building a couple of projects for my island. The first one is a playground that I've put right outside of the Resident Services building, and I've fenced it off with a kit that Tom Nook provided to me. I really like the fencing options available — there are various different styles and materials, and placing them is a snap — they automatically connect and even create a 90-degree angle if you're laying them out in a corner. (I just wish I could hop over some of the shorter fences.) The second project is a picnic area, which I'm putting in on a raised hill on the southeast side of the island. I had to build a ramp in order to get everyone up there, which led to a rather cramped dedication ceremony when the entrance to the ramp was too close to the back of Camofrog's new house! I decided to pay Tom Nook to relocate it, which is a great idea — you can not only do it with houses, but also town buildings. I've been to a lot of my friends' islands to see their ideas and layouts, and this

is probably the best feature by far. (But it'll cost ya!)

DAY EIGHTEEN

A friend of mine came by to sell her turnips (by the way, Daisy Mae is such a cutie!) and left me a present: a magic wand! It's a cool item that lets you instantly change the outfit you're wearing. It's a great idea, but I don't really like the execution: You can't use the same component in multiple outfits. If you like to wear glasses all the time, like me, you're going to be a little let down. I still had a lot of fun casting spells, though!

DAY TWENTY

Finally, the best news came from Isabelle and Tom Nook: Strawberry's popularity has reached the ears of K.K. Slider himself! As the sun rose over Strawberry Island, all of the villagers, the Nook family, Isabelle and I gathered around to hear him perform. Also, with Tom Nook's blessing, I got the permits to lay out paths and change the island's terrain! One of the first things I did was build paths from the plaza to the picnic area, airport and playground. It's strange to think that less than a month ago, this was an overgrown island in the middle of nowhere, but now it's a thriving community. What will tomorrow hold?

Dear Reader,
I hope you liked my little introduction to life on Strawberry Island. It may not be all sunshine and roses, but I've been loving every minute of it. I can't wait to see what the future will hold, especially with the fishing tournament and Bunny Day this weekend! Take care of yourself and I hope to see you soon.

~ Becky

9.0

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: NINTENDO RATING: E

SECOND OPINION
MEANWHILE, ON NF ISLAND

AFTER WINNING MY way into being one of the first people in the States to play the original Animal Crossing, then spending a fair bit of free time investing in a second virtual village in Wild World on the DS, I took an extended break from the mainline AC series. City Folk didn't capture my interest, and while I did like what I saw with New Leaf, I figured I could safely give that one a pass too since Nintendo would surely have a "real" console sequel on the market soon after it.

Yeah, OK. Misjudged that one.

And so it was that I found myself anticipating New Horizons as my first real return back to the Animal Crossing world in over 14 years. And a whole lot of life has happened in that span of time, so I was more specifically anticipating New Horizons because I wanted to play alongside my sons, sharing one island between all of us and working as a team to transform it from a rugged untamed wilderness into a beautiful tropical resort.

I've been doing most of the work.

I may have made another misjudgement when I thought that Carter and Calvin would be just as excited about this game as I was. They were at first! I got the island started, naming my character "Daddy" and doing all the initial setup stuff. Then Calvin took his turn and heart-warmingly decided to pitch his tent right next to mine. Then Carter took his turn . . . and did the exact opposite, placing his residence as far away from his little brother's as possible. (Understandable.)

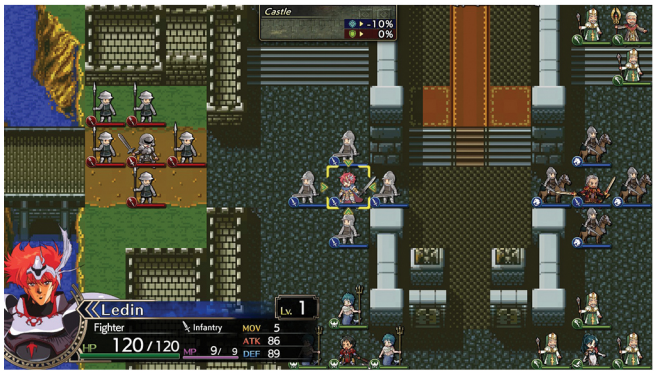
Since those opening moments, though, the boys have only returned to play a handful of times. Carter moreso than Calvin — he's at least done enough to upgrade his home into a proper house. Calvin's still rockin' the Day 1 tent. I guess the Animal Crossing experience just didn't immediately resonate with these 8-year-old and 6-year-old boys.

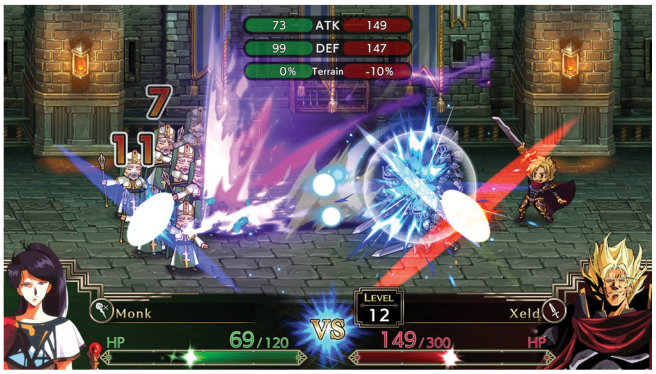
One odd game design decision that hasn't helped them get more plugged in is the fact that every new human who moves onto the same island after the first is treated like a secondary citizen. It's up to Daddy to accomplish all the major tasks Tom Nook assigns for developing the community — the Carter and Calvin characters can't trigger those conversations, and worse, they can't even contribute to in-progress tasks once they've already been activated by the all-powerful Player 1.

That's a misstep. If I were to think too callously about it, I'd wonder if it wasn't a decision made by Nintendo to encourage more Switch console purchases, since the boys could have their own islands if I gave in and let them get their own Switch Lites, for instance. But let's give the company the benefit of the doubt and assume no sinister intent fueled this oversight.

I'm interested to see if the boys' interest increases now that their cousins have also started playing the game, as it offers a way to "visit" them in this age of stay-at-home lockdowns. Maybe I'll report back in the future! For now, I am enjoying my return to Animal Crossing — it's just more work than I thought it would be! **— LUCAS**

8.5





Search for the Sacred Sword

LANGRISSER I & II

DO YOU LOVE Fire Emblem, but at the same time, would like something a little bit different? If so, then NIS America might have just the game — or rather, games — for you.

In 1991, Nippon Computer Systems released Langrisser: The Descendants of Light for the Sega Mega Drive in Japan. A turn-based strategy role-playing game with a fantasy setting, it bore some resemblance to Intelligent Systems' and Nintendo R&D1's Fire Emblem: Shadow Dragon and the Blade of Light, released for the Famicom the previous year. In a way, the two became something of rival franchises for a time; where Mario had Sonic and Street Fighter had Mortal Kombat, Fire Emblem had Langrisser.

The first installment was brought to North America by Treco under the name "Warsong," but it would also be the last installment of the series to see an English release until Aksys Games localized a revival of the series titled Langrisser Re:Incarnation for the Nintendo 3DS in 2016. As a result, this makes the Langrisser II half of this new package that game's first official English release — and for what it's worth, the original game saw more changes in localization than just its title, making this its first "truer" English release as well.

As noted, Langrisser is very similar to Fire Emblem at its core, but that doesn't mean the experience is the same. Whereas the latter has players control individual units throughout battles, Langrisser brings with it a greater sense of scale by giving each main unit troops to command by hiring mercenaries of varying types before initiating a mission. As commanders grow over the course of the game, they can take on new classes which allow them to command more varying types of troops, from soldiers and cavalry to mermen, lizardmen, harpies and more.

With troops at the ready, players can then command them to move to different parts of the map, where they can discover items or engage the enemy. However, keeping the commanders with their troops makes them stronger and allows them to recover damage after each turn, adding further layers to the strategy. There's an aesthetic difference as well, as when units clash, you're treated to a scene of many troops (their numbers representing the health meter of the unit) fighting all at once, adding a more epic feel to each encounter.

Another difference — at least to earlier Fire Emblems — is that there's no permadeath in gameplay. While characters do die, it's more when the story calls for it, as any units who fall otherwise will be given the command to fall back (though the same can't be said for the mercenaries, who can get downright obliterated).

This two-pack release has some other nice features going for it, as well. Players can choose between classic pixel art and remastered maps, glorious '80s-styled portrait art by Bubblegum Crisis/Record of Lodoss War artist Satoshi Urushihara and sleek new remastered art (with added cutscenes) by Ar Tonelico artist Ryo Nagi, and both classic and new musical arrangements from legendary composer Noriyuki Iwadare.

Best of all, you can mix and match these assets however you wish, at almost any time! The only downside is that there's no retro option for the characters' art on maps and in battles, which is a minor nitpick. And while the game features text in several languages, all the voices are in Japanese only.

If you're a Fire Emblem fan, there's little reason not to try Langrisser, especially with the eShop demo that awards bonuses in the retail release when you have save data! **— DAVID**

8.5

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: NIS AMERICA RATING: T

7.5

Extending the Experience on Switch

RUNE FACTORY 4 SPECIAL

LONG BEFORE STARDEW VALLEY had us swinging swords in monster-filled caverns, there was Rune Factory, which combined the farming and social relationship building of Harvest Moon/Story of Seasons with the swords and spells of an action RPG. I hadn't played a Rune Factory game since the very first one, but found myself in familiar territory when playing Rune Factory 4 Special — an updated and upscaled rerelease of the 3DS' Rune Factory 4.

Out of all the HM/SoS spin-offs I've played, Rune Factory has the best integration of the core farming and relationship mechanics into the overall presentation. The stamina/fatigue system is replaced by HP and Rune Points, which can be replenished by growing crops, eating food and finding energy sources in fields and dungeons. Everything you find or grow can be crafted into weapons and armor to attack and defend, as well as food to refill your energy and boost your stats. And the best part is you don't have to work for months to save money to buy livestock: You can build a Monster Barn for relatively little money and materials, grab some crops and go out and tame some monsters that will also help you farm!

The story, however, is fairly cliché — your hero literally drops in on Selphia, minus their memory, and is mistaken for the prince/princess of the mother country, Norad. Despite that, you're given the power to make changes to the town and your farm with points you earn by slaying monsters and accomplishing tasks. Like always, there are also townsfolk to meet and hopefully date . . . but I didn't find many of the characters to be particularly memorable. (Not even the more "fantastic" ones that you need to rescue in various dungeons before they come to live in Selphia with you.) The relationship-building cutscenes I've come to expect really seemed few and far between.

I found myself enjoying the overall look more playing in Handheld Mode than on the big screen — the conversion from 3DS pixel graphics to HD makes some icons and characters look great, while items like leafy greens get lost against the backdrop. Playing portably additionally has a big plus in that the touchscreen is supported, but playing using the Pro Controller was also fairly comfortable. In lieu of a second screen, there's a map that can be toggled on-screen and enlarged by pressing ZL, which automatically goes semi-transparent if you walk behind it. Dual audio is also present, but there's a lot of incidental dialogue when you're passing by people in town, and if you're playing in Japanese you might miss out if you don't understand it.

What I found to be the hardest to deal with was the difficulty spike between dungeons. I was soloing a lot of them, but having a monster or another party member along with me was certainly a big help. One thing I really missed was the ability to camp out in dungeons, which I was able to do in the first game — but having an instant Escape spell mapped to ZR was a huge plus.

The "Special" part includes two additional DLC features: a series of "Another Stories," which are brief storybook vignettes narrated by all the spouses in the game, and the Newlywed Mode, which is a brief standalone adventure between you and your spouse. It's more of a tech demo than anything — the character portraits of the major players get the "Live 2D" style of animation treatment and the music is remixed, but otherwise everything's the same. It's like Rune Factory 4.5.

For an updated 7-year-old game, Rune Factory 4 Special does hold up fairly well, but there are a lot of other titles that have already been released or are in the pipeline that will probably hold much more appeal to RPG and sim fans. **— REBECCA**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: XSEED
DEVELOPER: MARVELOUS
RATING: T

Unremarkable Reunion Tour

TOKYO MIRAGE SESSIONS #FE ENCORE

THE SWITCH'S GROWING library of ports has offered a beautiful opportunity for many overlooked games to receive a new lease on life. It's only fitting that Tokyo Mirage Sessions #FE earned a rerelease, considering that its first outing on the Wii U ended up feeling a little underwhelming. Yet while the Encore edition is perfectly adequate, it lacks any meaningful new features, and struggles to stand out among the Switch's many more impressive games.

When it first debuted, Tokyo Mirage Sessions #FE felt like a bit of a disappointment. The announcement that legendary role-playing game developer Atlus was teaming up with Intelligent Systems was met with understandable enthusiasm. Fans were excited by what promised to be a crossover between the Fire Emblem and Shin Megami Tensei franchises, but the end result looked like neither. If anything, the game plays like a Persona title, with high school students living ordinary lives in a bustling Tokyo, then entering a magical realm to fight monsters.

The Fire Emblem connection is tenuous at best. There are more playable Fire Emblem characters in Super Smash Bros. Ultimate than here in Tokyo Mirage Sessions. The handful of characters who do appear all have amnesia, so it's hard to claim that this really has much in common with the beloved fantasy series at all.

Rather than focusing on archers or mages, Tokyo Mirage Sessions tells a story about Japanese idol culture. In this game's world, performing arts have tangible power that can be used for good or evil — singing a song with enough emotion can vanquish a demon (or "Mirage"), and, as such, the heroes are all working to build their careers as celebrities in order to save the world.

The execution may be difficult to take seriously for Westerners who aren't well versed in idol culture, as there's something inherently Japanese about the absurdity of defeating a monster by posing for a fashion shoot. Nevertheless, if you're willing to roll with this odd setup, there's a lot of fun to be had by simply drinking in the game's adorable nonsense.

Tokyo Mirage Sessions soars highest when it's embracing its inherent weirdness: when someone dresses up in a cat mascot costume to charm enemies, or when a three-minute cutscene shows off a dance performance as a metaphor for levelling up. The incorporation of music and performance into the gameplay turns Tokyo Mirage Sessions into a rare multimedia treat, which is as much about sitting back and enjoying the show as it is about actually pressing buttons. It could almost be said that this is a video game musical, and considering how well it all works, it's a shame there aren't more games that feature elaborate musical numbers as part of their action.

Unfortunately, the game always seems just a little too pleased with itself whenever it pauses to do something wacky and cool — and these pauses happen frequently. Turn-based battles will be interrupted — sometimes completely at random — for a character to perform a song-and-dance number to power up their special attack. These are fun to watch at first, but quickly become repetitive.

The game has a problem with recycling content in other ways, too. Side missions (the easiest way to level up) involve a lot of backtracking to old areas to grind for loot. Atlus games have a reputation for being agonizingly long, and even though Tokyo Mirage Sessions is relatively brisk, clocking in at around 50 hours, it still manages to wear out its welcome by the time it wraps up.

This isn't a bad game by any stretch of the imagination — it's simply too long! Tokyo Mirage Sessions could

have made an excellent 10- or 15-hour story, but it's been stretched out to the point that it lacks decent pacing. The good news is that releasing this on the Switch helps a little — it's now easier to dip in and out, to plug in a few minutes here and there while on the go, rather than having to make every play session a lengthy, meaningful experience.

If the biggest problem with the game is simply that there's too much of it, things certainly could be worse. The characters are charming, the plot is enjoyable and combat is as much fun as possible when dealing with turn-based random encounters. For fans of this kind of game, it's a treat.

It's a shame that there's not much new content in the Encore edition. It doesn't feel as if a lot of effort went into making this port appeal to potential double dippers. There are a few cosmetic changes, a few new animations and some quality-of-life improvements, but otherwise, it's exactly the same as the Wii U title. This is a shame, as the game's competition on the Switch is strong.

While it was fairly unique on the Wii U, Tokyo Mirage Sessions suffers a bit in comparison to other role-playing games that have been released on the Switch. Fire Emblem: Three Houses, for example, feels a lot like the game that fans hoped that this would be. Its school setting, calendar-based time management and ample relationship-building all come straight from the Atlus playbook. It's hard not to look at Tokyo Mirage Sessions with the benefit of hindsight, and see what it could have been if the developers had gone in another direction.

It almost feels as if Tokyo Mirage Sessions was the inspirational spark that allowed Three Houses to happen; that Intelligent Systems learned enough from collaborating with Atlus that the studio was able to infuse Fire Emblem games with an added layer of role-playing charm.

As such, it's probably kindest to think of Tokyo Mirage Sessions as a necessary stepping stone on the path to better games for everyone. This title paved the way for bigger and better things in the future, and while it doesn't quite reach the heights of Three Houses itself, it's certainly still an enjoyable experience. **— MATTHEW L.**

7.5

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: ATLUS RATING: T

What? Pokémon Animation is Evolving!

POKÉMON: MEWTWO STRIKES BACK – EVOLUTION

ASH KETCHUM'S CAUGHT in a time loop. That's the only explanation at this point! He first set out on his journey to become a Pokémon Master over 20 years ago, on his 10th birthday. Yet, year after year, story arc after story arc, he never ages! The original Ash has canonically completed the quests of every mainline series sequel up through Sun & Moon, but in all the years spent doing that, he's somehow never turned 11. Even more confusing is the fact that there's now more than one Ash! A few years ago, the series' movie timeline was rebooted and a new version of Pallet Town's homegrown hero set off on an alternate journey with another iteration of Pikachu. Their adventures are ongoing now too.

. . . But now there's a third Ash in the mix! The Pokémon Company has just given us yet another reboot in the movie saga. Pokémon: Mewtwo Strikes Back — Evolution is a visually overhauled new version of the first-ever Pokémon film from over two decades ago. The storyline is the same. The characters are, for the most part, unaltered. But all the original 2D animation has been swept aside and replaced with a brand-new style of 3D CGI Pokémon animation that we've never seen before.

It's wild! And nearly unprecedented in the world of film, to my memory. We've seen plenty of these visual remasterings in the realm of video games — our cover star for this issue, Xenoblade Chronicles: Definitive Edition, is the perfect example. Its story is going to be the same as it originally was on Wii, years ago. But graphically, it's been supercharged — all the old character models replaced with newer, more expressive versions with much higher polygon counts. As we move along further in the growth of the gaming industry, we'll surely see even more of the classics of yesteryear remade in a similar manner.

But, again, for this treatment to be given to a movie? It's blazing a new trail. And I'm fascinated as to where that trail may take us next. Because I think this must just be the beginning . . . because I think that this visual overhaul is sensational.

I was skeptical at first. I raised an eyebrow at the debut trailer like every other aging Pokémon fan who first saw the first movie in theaters in 1999. But I warmed up to the changes as I sat down to watch the whole production with my sons, via Netflix. (Where it's now exclusively streaming in the States.) I feel like there's more work to be done with the human characters (see the main trio above), as their interpretations in this new style don't quite land. But the real stars of the show, the Pokémon themselves, are superb.

The fur! The glorious fur. Not all 'mons are fuzzy, but creatures like Arcanine with its majestic mane feel more alive than they ever have before in this new art style. The lighting is beautiful. The camera work is dynamic and energetic. And in producing Evolution, the artists at OLM wisely allowed themselves to deviate from the source material of the first Mewtwo Strikes Back whenever a shot-for-shot remake would not have been the best course of action. They even corrected some old errors! Pikachu knocked out a Golem with a Thunderbolt in the old film, which should have been impossible thanks to Golem's Ground typing. A Drowzee now gets zapped instead.

I loved it! My sons got to watch and enjoy the story for what it was, while I got to have the experience of constant comparison, matching up every scene I saw with my 20-year-old memories of the original. It's an intriguing viewing experience.

And just writing about it all here has me wondering again what the next step will be! Will more old Pokémon films get this same treatment, or was this just a pilot test of a new art style that will next be used for original stories instead? I'm ending up at the same point I did with my evaluation of Rescue Team DX. I recognize the merits of this reboot, but I want a crystal ball to gaze into the future so I can know if this is just the start of something new!

Whatever happens next, I think we can all agree on one absolute certainty: Poor Ash Ketchum will never be allowed to grow up!

— LUCAS

9.0

MOVIE DISTRIBUTER: TOHO
PRODUCTION BY: OLM RATING: PG

ARCHIVE

The complete list of Nintendo Force retail reviews from the past two years. Scores reflect individual reviewers' opinions.

SWITCH

TITLE	SCORE	REVIEWER	ISSUE
AI: The Somnium Files	8.5	Tony	#44
Astral Chain	8.5	Jonathan	#42
Blade Strangers	7.0	Jonathan	#36
BurgerTime Party!	8.0	Lucas	#44
Captain Toad: Treasure Tracker	7.5	Neal	#35
Contra: Rogue Corps	7.0	David	#43
Crash Bandicoot N. Sane Trilogy	7.5	David	#35
Crash Team Racing: Nitro-Fueled	8.0	David	#41
Crystal Crisis	9.0	Jonathan	#40
Daemon X Machina	7.0	Chris	#42
Dark Souls: Remastered	8.0	Chris	#37
Diablo III: Eternal Collection	9.0	Nadia	#37
Digimon Story: Cyber Sleuth – Complete Edition	8.5	Josh	#44
Dragon Ball FighterZ	8.0	Tony	#36
Dragon Quest Builders 2	9.0	Shesez	#41
Dragon Quest XI S: Echoes of an Elusive Age – Definitive Edition	9.5	Lucas	#43
Dreamworks Dragons: Dawn of New Riders	7.5	David	#39
Donkey Kong Country: Tropical Freeze	9.5	David	#34
Fire Emblem: Three Houses	9.5	Lucas	#41
Fitness Boxing	5.5	Chris	#38
Ghostbusters: The Video Game Remastered	7.5	Brett	#43
Guacamelee! One-Two Punch Collection	9.0	Jonathan	#42
Heroland	7.0	Rebecca	#45
Hyrule Warriors: Definitive Edition	7.5	Neal	#34
Ice Age: Scrat's Nutty Adventure!	5.0	Chris	#45
Katamari Damacy REROLL	9.5	Tony	#38
Layton's Mystery Journey: Katrielle and the Millionaires' Conspiracy – Deluxe Edition	8.5	Brett	#45
LEGO DC Super-Villains	8.0	Thor	#38
Little Dragons Café	7.0	Rebecca	#36
Luigi's Mansion 3	9.0	Chris	#44
Mario & Sonic at the Olympic Games: Tokyo 2020	8.5	David	#44
Mario Tennis Aces	6.5	Lucas	#35
Marvel Ultimate Alliance 3: The Black Order	7.0	Brett	#41
Mega Man 11	11/13	David	#36
Mega Man Legacy Collection	9.0	Neal	#34
Mega Man Legacy Collection 2	7.0	Neal	#34
Mega Man X Legacy Collection	9.5	Jonathan	#35
Mega Man X Legacy Collection 2	7.0	Jonathan	#35
Mega Man Zero/ZX Legacy Collection	9.0	David	#45
Model Debut #nicola	7.0	Rebecca	#44
Monster Boy and the Cursed Kingdom	8.5	David	#38
Monster Hunter Generations Ultimate	7.5	Kevin K.	#37
Moonlighter	8.0	Lucas	#39
My Time at Portia	5.5	Chris	#40
Namco Museum Arcade Pac	7.0	Brett	#38
New Super Lucky's Tale	9.0	David	#44
New Super Mario Bros. U Deluxe	8.0	Lucas	#38
Ni no Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch	9.0	Brett	#43
Nickelodeon Kart Racers	5.0	David	#37
Nintendo Labo Robot Kit	7.5	Lucas	#34
Nintendo Labo Variety Kit	8.5	Lucas	#34
Nintendo Labo Vehicle Kit	8.5	Lucas	#36
Nintendo Labo VR Kit	9.0	Lucas	#40
Octopath Traveler	8.5	Brett	#35
Overcooked! 2	7.0	Brett	#35
Paw Patrol: On a Roll	8.5	Lucas	#37
Pokémon: Let's Go, Pikachu! & Let's Go, Eevee!	8.5	Lucas	#37
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Ring Fit Adventure	8.5	Matthew T.	#44
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Scribblenauts Mega Pack	7.5	David	#37
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Shantae: Half-Genie Hero – Ultimate Edition	8.0	Tony	#34
Shining Resonance Refrain	7.0	Neal	#36
SNK 40th Anniversary Collection	8.5	Thor	#38
Snack World: The Dungeon Crawl – Gold	6.0	Brett	#45
Sonic Mania Plus	9.0	Tony	#35
Spyro Reignited Trilogy	9.0	David	#42
Star Wars Pinball	9.0	Lucas	#42
Starlink: Battle for Atlas	8.5	David	#37
Street Fighter 30th Anniversary Collection	8.5	Jonathan	#34
Super Dragon Ball Heroes: World Mission	6.0	Tony	#40
Super Mario Maker 2	10	Tony	#41
Super Mario Party	9.0	Lucas	#36
Super Monkey Ball: Banana Blitz	7.5	David	#44
Super Smash Bros. Ultimate	10	Lucas	#37
Sushi Striker: The Way of Sushido	7.5	Rebecca	#34
Team Sonic Racing	8.5	David	#41
The Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening	9.5	Jonathan	#43
The Ninja Saviors: Return of the Warriors	7.0	Jonathan	#44
The Nintendo Switch Lite	9.0	Matthew L.	#43
The Sega Genesis Mini	9.0	David	#43
The World Ends With You: Final Remix	6.5	Rebecca	#37
Travis Strikes Again: No More Heroes	8.0	Jonathan	#38
Trine 4: The Nightmare Prince	9.0	Lucas	#44
Valkyria Chronicles 4	8.5	Neal	#36
Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus	8.5	Neal	#35
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Xenoblade Chronicles 2: Torna ~ The Golden Country	8.5	Kevin K.	#36
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Yooka-Laylee and the Impossible Lair	9.0	Tony	#43
Yoshi's Crafted World	7.5	Lucas	#39
Ys VIII: Lacrimosa of DANA	9.5	Lucas	#36

3DS

TITLE	SCORE	REVIEWER	ISSUE
Etrian Odyssey Nexus	8.5	Nadia	#39
Kirby's Extra Epic Yarn	7.5	Neal	#39
Luigi's Mansion	8.0	Neal	#36
Mario & Luigi: Bowser's Inside Story + Bowser Jr.'s Journey	9.0	Neal	#38
Persona Q2: New Cinema Labyrinth	8.0	Matthew L.	#40
WarioWare Gold	8.5	Thor	#35
Yo-kai Watch 3	8.5	Lucas	#39
Yo-kai Watch Blasters: Red Cat Corps & White Dog Squad	6.5	Lucas	#37

REVIEW REMINDER
XENOBLADE CHRONICLES 3D

LISTEN, GANG. I need to come clean about something. Five years ago, in NF #15, I reviewed Xenoblade Chronicles 3D – the then-new portable port of the Wii original. I spoke about how I'd never finished the adventure on the Wii, as I'd given it two tries and quit partway through both times. I then congratulated myself on finally, at long last, seeing the story through to completion on the New Nintendo 3DS!

. . . I lied. I know, I know! I'm not sure why I felt the need to be untruthful in that review! The truth is that I actively played *nearly* all of the adventure myself, but fell away when a brutal boss bested me in the final story arc and ultimately just ended up watching YouTube videos of that last part. So I did see the story through to completion, in a way . . . but I didn't achieve total victory myself. I simply witnessed the reward gained through someone else's hard work!

I'm hopeful that the new Definitive Edition is going to give me yet another chance to actually roll the credits on my own – but I'll be truthful if I don't make it again this time. I blamed the failure of my first run of the Wii version on the fact that I was a new Dad taking care of Carter as a baby and that I must not have had the time to conquer a 60+ hour JRPG. Well now I've got four sons instead of one, and even less "free time." The outlook's not good for me.

I think I did better with Xenoblade Chronicles 3D since it was portable and easier to pick up and play for a few minutes here and there, and, in that, having the Definitive Edition on the Switch should help me find more success on what will be my fourth (or is it fifth?) time with this same story. But as that was one of the 3DS port's only feathers in its cap, there won't be any reason to revisit it after the Switch port drops. It was impressive at the time – as I tried to be. But let's leave it (and my lie) in the past. **– LUCAS**

WEBSITE INSIGHT

FANNING THE FLAMES OF FANDOM

A famous fan campaign helped bring Xenoblade Chronicles to the States; a dedicated community lives on!

REMEMBER THE RAINFALL? Xenoblade might never have gained any traction in the United States without a fervent fan campaign that pushed NOA to release the first game on Wii. Now, years later, we caught up with the Operation Rainfall team.

NF: First up, for our readers who don't know you yet, can you introduce yourselves?
STEVE: I'm Steve Baltimore, the Co-Owner of Operation Rainfall. After 35 years of gaming I'm still going strong and loving JRPGs more and more by the day.
QUENTIN: I'm Quentin H., the Xbox Managing Editor and Project Lead for Interviews with Operation Rainfall (also known as oprainfall). I have been writing for this site for almost five years.
JOSH: I'm Josh Speer, and I'm both the EIC and Review Manager at oprainfall. I've been with the site for almost a decade now, which is crazy!

Alright, let's begin at the beginning. When was Operation Rainfall first founded, and why?
STEVE: Operation Rainfall started in June of 2011. I didn't come on until around August of that year. That was right after they moved off the IGN Forums to Facebook and the IRC channel. Our goal was to get Xenoblade, The Last Story and Pandora's Tower localized for the Wii. These games were already out in Europe, so bringing them over to North America would give us some more core games to play on the Wii. We felt there was a drought of these types of games on the system at the time. That's where our name comes from, actually! We were going to bring "rainfall to end the drought." Hence, Operation Rainfall.

It's now been eight years since Xenoblade Chronicles was officially published on the Wii in North America, and The Last Story and Pandora's Tower received official localized releases as well after that. What was the celebration like when the team realized that the original campaign had gone three for three, achieving complete success?
STEVE: It was a crazy time. We actually had no idea the XSEED Games teaser was for Pandora's Tower at the time. We had almost given up on that one at that point, but it turns out that was exactly what they were teasing! I mean, they had a picture of a tower in rainfall – it seemed way too obvious. I have an infinite amount of respect for XSEED Games for taking a chance on it.

It was truly an amazing feeling seeing the entire campaign get accomplished. It gave me a sense of pride, and I was hoping others would love all three of the oprainfall titles as much as we did.
JOSH: That was before my time, but I can only imagine how exciting that moment was. But as someone that joined the crew after following the campaign, I'm just proud the oprainfall site achieved such an ambitious goal.

After that initial success, Operation Rainfall didn't just close up shop and head home. Can you talk a bit about the decision to transition from the fan campaign and transform the movement into the oprainfall website?
STEVE: We felt a lot of other niche games were being passed over at the time, so a site would help spread awareness of the titles that needed more exposure. Opening a site to give these games more coverage seemed like the next logical step.
QUENTIN: I actually participated in the campaign to get the "Rainfall Trilogy" of games localized for the United States before I started to write here, so I was able to see the before and after firsthand. Heck, I even mailed cocktail skewer swords out to Nintendo as part of the campaign to localize Xenoblade Chronicles!

For me, there was a natural evolution from oprainfall being a fan campaign to a video game news/review website (we also cover manga and anime now too!), as the site's focus never wavered from bringing attention to niche and indie games. After all, there are plenty of websites that will cover the latest Call of Duty or Super Mario Bros. games in detail. However, these same websites won't necessarily talk in-depth about great indie/niche games like Gunvolt Chronicles: Luminous Avenger iX or London Detective Mysteria – two titles that are just as deserving of attention. If we didn't help bring attention to these three Wii games

INTERVIEW BY LUCAS M. THOMAS

that simply weren't being localized for North America, who knows if we would have ever gotten them by the end of the Wii's life cycle! The news and reviews that we do now are simply a continuation of that original purpose. And hey, maybe if we had started a few years earlier, we could have gotten Doshin the Giant the attention it deserved too!

While oprainfall has established itself as a permanent community over these last several years, the Xenoblade brand has continued to grow and thrive as well. What's it been like to witness the franchise hitting milestones like the release of sequels like Xenoblade Chronicles X and Xenoblade Chronicles 2?

STEVE: Honestly, it's been amazing. Most of us here were huge fans of the Xeno franchise from the very beginning with Xenogears. This franchise has always been near and dear to me. Xenoblade is the first open-world RPG which I felt had that great level of JRPG storytelling. The Xeno franchise has always had these deep, impactful stories. They have changed the way I look at storytelling in gaming and shaped my gaming life for years, so it fills me with joy to see others discover something I have loved for a long time.

QUENTIN: For me, it felt like a vindication of the original campaign. Nintendo is a publicly traded company that can't release games to markets that simply won't buy them. The fact that we ultimately got Xenoblade Chronicles X and Xenoblade Chronicles 2 in North America, when we weren't originally going to even get the first game, shows that there was a demand, both then and now, for both these particular sequels — and other Xenoblade Chronicles-like titles — here in North America. That is simply a wonderful feeling.

JOSH: I'm kind of the black sheep for this topic. See, as much as I appreciate oprainfall for bringing that trio stateside, I still have yet to beat any of the games. I bought all three, and I've enjoyed those I've played, but I'm notoriously bad at ARPGs, so Xenoblade is a steep challenge for me. I started it, and hit a wall pretty quickly on the second or third boss. That said, I fully intend to dive deep into the game when I have more free time. (Or when I develop a functioning time machine.)

Did you all totally flip out when Shulk was revealed to be joining the cast of Super Smash Bros.?

STEVE: Oh yeah, the staff was super excited when Shulk was revealed as part of the Super Smash Bros. roster. I had to try him out as soon as I opened the game of course, and was really amazed at how well they integrated him into the game. Incorporating the Monado into his moveset just added to the awesome there. They picked some of the best songs from the Xenoblade soundtrack as well. I couldn't be happier with the job they did adding some Xenoblade flavor into the game!

QUENTIN: I was surprised and delighted when Shulk was announced as part of the roster in Super Smash Bros. for Nintendo 3DS back in August 2014. Keep in mind that Monolith Soft's mysterious new game, X, had also just been rechristened Xenoblade Chronicles X during Nintendo's E3 2014 Digital Event. Between that E3 2014 announcement and the Super Smash Bros. announcement, it really felt like Nintendo was now taking Xenoblade Chronicles seriously as a worldwide franchise.

JOSH: At first I was super excited. After all, I love diversity in Smash Bros., and I especially like the weird and unexpected characters like Piranha Plant and King K. Rool. But after playing against someone who was truly skilled with Shulk, I quickly grew to dislike him in Smash. I have suffered many, many losses to that Monado-wielding hero . . .

Now things are coming full-circle with the approaching release of Xenoblade Chronicles: Definitive Edition. I have to imagine you all must have a great sense of pride! Like seeing your child all grown up!

STEVE: When Nintendo revealed Xenoblade Chronicles: Definitive Edition, it was quite a moment for me. Just eight years ago we had to campaign to show there was a demand for this wonderful franchise — now it has gained enough popularity to get a remaster! Honestly, I'm just very happy others found something to love as much as we did and I hope the fan base continues to grow for years to come.

QUENTIN: I do, and that's because it's important to make sure that a modern audience can have easy access to play Xenoblade Chronicles.

To give a bit of historical background: Xenoblade Chronicles was released as a North American title in April 2012, and Nintendo announced that they were ending production of the Wii in October 2013. The Wii's successor console, the Wii U, sold the fewest Nintendo consoles ever before it ended production in January 2017. At this point, both of the home consoles that could play that Wii game were no longer in production. Of course, sandwiched in between was 2015's Nintendo 3DS rerelease that could only be played on the New Nintendo 3DS XL. This handheld has since been supplanted by the Nintendo Switch.

When you have a video game that is "locked" only into discontinued or increasingly irrelevant consoles, you wind up in a situation where people simply can't experience that game anymore without going to considerable trouble and/or expense to track down all the necessary gaming parts. A perfect example of this phenomenon is Hideo Kojima's Snatcher, which is probably the best and most industry-important game that you will never get to play. Snatcher was localized for North America once, on the Sega CD in January 1995. It has since become critically acclaimed, heralded as a clear predecessor to the Metal Gear Solid series, and it now serves as an inspiration for games that have come out decades later (2064: Read Only Memories being one such example). However, because you cannot play Snatcher in 2020 without tracking down a working Sega CD console and then paying hundreds of dollars for a copy of the game, most gamers will never get to play it for themselves. With Xenoblade Chronicles being accessible again for newer platforms and for new gamers, this Definitive Edition makes sure that Xenoblade Chronicles simply doesn't become yet another obscure and impossible-to-play game in the future.

What's next for Operation Rainfall as we head into the future?

STEVE: We will continue to run the site and provide information about niche titles coming from Japan and unique indie titles from around the world. It's been quite a ride over the last eight years, and I never expected to be where I am currently. I have no plans of hanging up my controller anytime soon, and I'm so excited for Xenoblade Chronicles: Definitive Edition that I can hardly contain it!

QUENTIN: We will continue to cover the latest video game news and reviews, with a special focus on those lesser-known awesome titles that may not receive that much attention otherwise. We will also continue attending industry events and conferences like GDC, E3, PAX and more to interview developers and publishers and to go hands-on with upcoming games. Finally, I will personally be playing Xenoblade Chronicles: Definitive Edition when it is released and talking about it online!

JOSH: Speaking for myself, my goal is to give the truly niche and retro-focused games as much love as possible. I often like the strange stuff that few others at the site either know about or have played. So I see my job as raising the banner for those games, and helping spread the news online. Oh, and also Kickstarter games. I love me some crowdfunding, and take a special joy in sharing compelling titles, such as the recently funded Sea of Stars.

Finally, who's the greatest character in the Xenoblade series? Please don't say Tatsu.

STEVE: Haha, well Tatsu is quite a character, but I wouldn't call him the greatest. I have a fondness for Nia personally. She is very strong and dedicated to her friends. Her English voice actor really brings out her wonderful personality. Rex, of course, is dense like the other Xenoblade protagonist who didn't pick the best girl!

QUENTIN: Melia. Always Melia. Without spoiling Xenoblade Chronicles for anyone who is reading this, I will just say that I have always loved how she always will push forward through the heavy adversity that she faces throughout the game. It is extremely hard not to like her as a result.

JOSH: I'm pretty sure I'm not qualified to say here, since I'm only a few bosses into the game. That said, I'll be the crazy person and say Metal Face. I always love interesting villains.

OperationRainfall.com

MASTERS OF METALLURGY

MAN AT ARMS: REFORGED

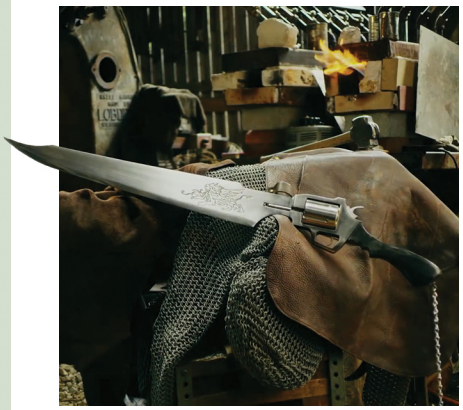
Brilliant blacksmiths bringing make-believe blades into reality!

FINALLY, WE CAN'T wrap up an issue named "Live by the Sword" without featuring at least a few real-life weapons. We're all used to wielding legendary blades inside game worlds, but what would it be like to actually be able to hold those same fantastical swords in the real world? That's what the Man at Arms YouTube series sets out to answer.

First started over seven years ago, Man at Arms originally starred Tony Swatton — an experienced blacksmith and gemcutter who'd worked for years to forge props for Hollywood films — and he walked viewers through the step-by-step process of bringing iconic weapons like the Master Sword to life. Not as props, but as real, edged blades!

Midway through 2014, Tony passed the role of host on to Kerry and Matt Stagmer of the Baltimore Knife and Sword weapon shop. The series became "Man at Arms: Reforged" at that time, and over a hundred more pop culture swords have been made into the real deal since! Browsing through the years of archived episodes is well worth an afternoon or two the next time you find yourself cruisin' the 'Tube. Give the show a look! **— LUCAS**

YouTube.com/AWEme



BY JONATHAN HOLMES

NEXT ISSUE

Another major Mario milestone is just over the horizon: the 35th anniversary of the original Super Mario Bros. game! Rumor has it that Nintendo's preparing a Super-sized celebration to mark the occasion, and further rumors suggest that the big blowout reveal of those party plans was meant to happen at this year's E3. So what happens when E3 doesn't happen?

Well, Nintendo's had one foot out the door of the annual Electronic Entertainment Expo for a while now, ever since they shifted away from live stage presentations and began broadcasting big Nintendo Direct videos in June every year instead. We suspect that the planned Direct will still take place, and we further suspect that the big Mario news will still break around that time. We'll just miss out on getting to see whatever wonderful Mushroom Kingdom set the Big N would have crafted to decorate their booth space in the L.A. Convention Center!

. . . What's that? What is the rumor, you ask? Well, supposedly, past 3D adventures like **Super Mario 64**, **Super Mario Sunshine** and **Super Mario Galaxy** are going to get the remake treatment on the Switch. (It's about time, I know!) Hopefully by the time our next NF issue hits your mailbox, rumor will be a confirmed reality, and we'll get to fully join in the celebration. Even if Nintendo holds back that reveal, the approach of the Super Mario series' 35th birthday is enough reason to rejoice alone. So, either way, get ready to Do the Mario!

IN THE WORKS FOR ISSUE #47:

THE HISTORY OF
SUPER MARIO

XENOBLADE CHRONICLES:
DEFINITIVE EDITION

TRIALS OF MANA

SHANTAE
AND THE SEVEN SIRENS

SUPER SMASH BROS.
ULTIMATE
FIGHTERS PASS
VOL. 2 -
ARMS FIGHTER REVEALED!
(AND MAYBE MORE?)

STREETS OF RAGE 4

MOVING OUT

BEST FRIEND FOREVER

PANZER PALADIN

CLUBHOUSE GAMES:
51 WORLDWIDE CLASSICS

NINJALA

BORDERLANDS
LEGENDARY
COLLECTION

BIOSHOCK:
THE COLLECTION

XCOM 2
COLLECTION

AND MUCH
MORE!

JULY/ AUGUST 2020

SEEK OUT THE SWORDS!

READY TO EMBARK on an extra quest? We had such a positive response to our big Boo hunt back in Issue #42 that we're challenging all of you with another test of your visual acuity! How many swords can you find in this sword-themed NF issue?

There are two categories of competition this time. First up, try to count all of the swords that appear visually throughout this entire magazine. They could be depicted in artwork (like the three swords held by the Tri Force Heroes below), or they could be in screenshots of various games. Some may be printed pretty small! That's the challenging part!

Second, try to find all the appearances of the word "sword" in the text! That's the next level of difficulty, because it means you'll have to read this edition from cover to cover! Plurals count, so add any appearance of "swords" to your tally, along with any times either word might appear in capitalized form as well. Swords, swords, swords!

We'll report back with the answers to both challenges in our next issue! (. . . Wait, that means I have to be really sure of the solutions to both myself. Eek!) Enjoy the quest! **— LUCAS**

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